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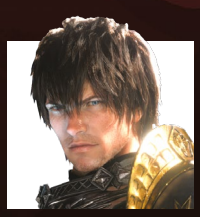

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"A NEW MONKEY ISLAND GAME, HELMED BY ITS ORIGINAL CREATOR"

No matter how jaded you get about the games industry, no matter how much you think there's nothing that could surprise you, there'll always be something around the corner to knock you for a loop. A new *Monkey Island* game, helmed by its original creator, in 2022... that's the kind of announcement that reminds you that miracles do still happen. And when a miracle happens, what can we do but slap it on the cover of PC Gamer?

And to say our feature delves deep to discover the origins of that miracle would be an understatement...

ROBIN VALENTINE
Twitter
@robinlvalentine

This month
Buried his greatest treasure (the *Warhammer Online* collector's edition).

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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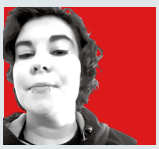
The PC Gamer team



KATIE WICKENS
Twitter
@Steins_Kake

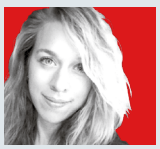
This month
Discovered the importance of storage containers to Scottish culture in *Clanfolk*.

SARAH JAMES
Twitter
@vision_burn

This month
Demanded we take her seriously while she explained to us the importance of 'Dinks'.

MOLLIE TAYLOR
Twitter
@mollietayy

This month
Pushed to get as many pics of her OC into our *Final Fantasy XIV* feature as possible.



LAUREN MORTON
Twitter
@ComradeCupcake_

This month
Let us all know why one of her safe places is a dungeon full of mad science experiments.

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A cat, lost in a strange, post-apocalyptic city, must find their way back to the natural world. It's full of furry charm, but how does it play? Find out in our review.

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GALACTIC SCANDAL

How EVE ONLINE's most famous player was finally forced to quit the game

The Mittani, a legendary and polarising figure in *EVE Online*, has stepped down as CEO of two in-game 'Goon' organisations that control a significant portion of in-game space. The resignation happened in the aftermath of allegations he failed to address persistent sexual harassment and misconduct in the organisation.

"My people, I'm afraid that the sheer amount of smears being flung my way across the galaxy are simply too much to handle at a personal level," The Mittani wrote. "[The accusations are] becoming simply too radioactive to continue leading Goonswarm without my presence being a net negative for the wider tribe."

TOP: Something Awful was founded in 1999 as a personal website but its forum community took on a life of its own, and it's where Goonswarm originates.

"The accusations that I am aware of are unsubstantiated falsehoods, and I did not sign up to be the scapegoat for the entire galaxy ... the only honourable thing to do is exit in an orderly fashion. I have transferred shares to Xttz and will be making TheAdj Interim CEO of Goonwaffe."

THE ALLEGATIONS AGAINST THE MITTANI ARE COMPLEX

The allegations against The Mittani are complex, but come down to a confrontational and dismissive management style, including allegations he insulted and banned one high-profile member who made complaints of abuse. The other major charge is he allegedly endorsed the ongoing membership of a Goonswarm officer, previously banned from the Something Awful forums (where Goonswarm originated) a decade prior for reportedly being involved with child pornography.

GUCCI GATES

WINDOWS XP CHIC

No fashion goes out of style forever, even the most ugly stuff from the early 2000s. I hadn't expected that to be true of computer software also, yet Microsoft has announced a new clothing line plastered in throwbacks to its own software. Including tees with the famous XP Bliss wallpaper on the back. ■ *JR*

RING-POSSIBLE

$20K FOR HALO HISTORY

You might think players have done everything there is in *Halo 2*, but you'd be wrong. Charlie 'Cr1tikal' White is offering $20,000 to anyone who completes a 'Legendary All Skulls On' run of Bungie's classic without dying: a feat that's never happened before in history. ■ *JW*

RUNETERROR

LAME LEGENDS

If you thought *League of Legends* games were already too long, spare a thought for kkyuahri. The Korean streamer was sniped by some crappy viewers, pulling her into a three-hour game and killing her 120 times. Even worse, she was handed a 14-day ban afterwards. ■ *MT*

ABOVE: The Mittani took it personally, saying, "I, and my partner, deserve better than to wake each day to find some new horrific slander being levelled against me."

GEN EVE

The Mittani's resignation is a sign of a deeper schism within Goonswarm. There's old-guard Goons, as Something Awful members call themselves, and newcomers who aren't down with SA's version of internet culture. SA is a foundational part of online culture, but could be shockingly toxic and utterly unwilling to change.

That intransigence may be at an end, at least in the context of *EVE*. One member of Goonswarm said "legacy, rules, and policies" of "true goons" – players who came to EVE Online from the Something Awful forums, rather than joining directly – have failed.

This isn't the Mittani's first brush with controversy, but it's the one that brought him down. The Goonswarm Federation, and The Imperium coalition it leads, is one of the longest-lived organisations in *EVE* history.

The uproar in Goonswarm also indicates that broader cultural currents are having an impact: EVE's history of high-profile schemes and deceptions give the impression that it's a game where player actions most would consider cruel are not only tolerated but celebrated, and it's easy to see how that environment attracts abusive behaviour.

Something Awful was founded 22 years ago. *EVE* itself is a bit younger, but perhaps one has outgrown the other. ■ ***Andy Chalk***

Highs & Lows

HIGHS

No FT

A dev punked a crypto-sponsored conference in Brazil by turning his talk into a surprise attack on NFTs.

GTA gassed

GTA Online stays relevant with an update based around high gas prices and a heatwave.

The cat's meow

Stray has been something of an indie hit, but PC got it best with a mod that makes the cat shout 'Jason!'

Heroes of the Gone

Blizzard's done with *Heroes of the Storm*, with "no plans for new for-purchase content to be added".

DisUnity

Game engine Unity completed a merger with IronSource, a company which has a history in malware.

Anti-porn cap

The Chinese Communist Party is testing a 'mind-reading' helmet that detects dirty thoughts, to aid in the censorship of pornography.

LOWS

The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

THE SPY
The Spy has been reading your dad's tweets.

Just recently, somebody – it literally doesn't matter who – said something stupid on the internet. You might imagine they typed their screed while bathing in a mound of fetid offal. But perhaps they are just a regular person, with a job and a family who loves them, who nevertheless gets cheap thrills from posting dumb shit anonymously. It's not important. The point is that they wrote a barely literate take about *GTA VI*, and now The Spy has seen it.

Why did The Spy see it? The account had maybe four followers. Compared to the incomprehensible vastness of online content, it was nothing – a grain of sand in a digital universe. But the beach – which in this metaphor is Twitter – has extensive archiving tools, which means that people can search it for terms like '*GTA*' and 'woke' and then retweet the results for an audience of followers so jaded that they need a constant supply of unhinged dogshit in their feed just to feel alive.

Duly surfaced, the stupid tweet is further recycled by a cottage industry of accounts who quote tweet bad takes with clever put-downs for hundreds of thousands. Now the ball is rolling. We're no longer dealing with a handful of people who have a pretty bad opinion about an upcoming game that they shared with a handful of friends, bots, and internet randos. No: now it is culture war. Suddenly a congressional candidate for Florida thinks *GTA* is going to "go broke". Websites start posting a list of reasons why *GTA* – a game series about doing crimes – is not, in fact, 'woke'. And don't forget The Spy, who is now writing about this on the page you are reading, thus becoming part of the very machine being raged against.

CULTURE SHOCK

Is this better than the alternative: just allowing people with bad opinions to exist without an entire media circus dedicated to letting The Spy – and, by extension, you – know? That's not for The Spy to say. Instead, then, The Spy will just explain why this happened, beyond the more existential reason that having a big argument is easier than enacting lasting and systemic change.

In July, Bloomberg's Jason Schreier published a report about a transformation in Rockstar's workplace culture. Where once, around the release of *Red Dead Redemption*, the developer made headlines for its 100-hour work weeks and months of crunch time, now – according to Schreier – morale is higher than it's ever been.

Schreier's report details, among other things, changes to scheduling and the removal of managers that were known to be abusive or difficult to work with. For our purposes, it also details some information on the long-awaited sequel. "Rockstar's next game, *Grand Theft Auto VI*, will include a playable female protagonist for the first time, according to people familiar with the game. The woman, who is Latina, will be one of a pair of leading characters in a story influenced by the bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde, the people said."

ACCORDING TO SCHREIER, MORALE IS HIGHER THAN IT'S EVER BEEN

Is this woke? *GTA* has always positioned itself as a satirical commentary on popular culture, often to wildly varying degrees of success. Perhaps then, given everything that has happened since the release of *GTA V*, the most satirical thing Rockstar can do is be a good workplace that treats its employees well. Maybe that's a bad take. If so, The Spy invites you to share it online. Spy out. ■

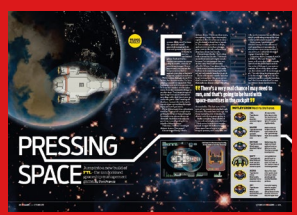
The Spy

This month in... 2012

ISSUE
244, October 2012

ON THE COVER
Guild Wars 2

IN THE CINEMAS
Brave



1 *Guild Wars 2* did not, it turns out, disrupt the MMO genre. People, by and large, actually like the traditional MMO contrivances and friction points it was all-too-keen to disrupt. *WoW*, as always, persisted just fine. Nevertheless, ten years later, ArenaNet's MMO is still going strong – this year's third expansion proving it still has plenty of life in it yet.

2 Locked to 30 frames per second, and tied to the woeful Games for Window Live, *Dark Souls* still gets 90% in our review. It's just that good.

3 *FTL: Faster Than Light* gets a four page feature ahead of its pending release. It's no surprise why: its novel premise made it an irresistible story generator, but one that wasn't so complex that it became difficult to play. One of the quintessential PC Gamer indie favourites of the time, it remains a blast to play today.

"HORROR MOVIE PARADISE" -POLYGON

SHUDDER

SO GOOD IT'S SCARY

STREAM 7 DAYS FREE

Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

Blockchain companies were major (and somewhat controversial) sponsors for the festival.

BIG IN BRAZIL

Don't know any LATIN AMERICAN GAME STUDIOS by name? That's about to change

The highlight of July's Brazil International Games (BIG) festival was a surprise for everyone, especially the event's blockchain sponsors: game developer Mark Venturelli's viral talk 'Why NFTs are a Nightmare'. In an interview afterward Venturelli said something about the convention that I've kept thinking about since I left Brazil, "I don't feel I have hurt BIG by talking shit about NFTs because BIG does not need these guys," he said. "It's the other way around. Our biggest event here in the Brazilian industry is not going anywhere."

Outside of Venturelli's talk, which was a brilliant takedown of the design and politics of blockchain games, BIG didn't make international headlines. It's not an E3 or a Gamescom, but that belies how much potential is bubbling just under the surface of the Latin American gaming scene. Venturelli said local developers are now getting investments from Epic and Microsoft, and there are prospective 200-person studios opening in Brazil in the near future. "Right now, because of the instability in Europe, investors are looking at South America like, 'Is this the next big thing?'" he said. Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo and Epic were present at BIG this year, a far cry from the much smaller indie festivals of past years.

"Indie games are getting attention, but the industry still needs to evolve a little bit more to get competitive," said developer Leonardo Castanho, head of a small team making *Astrea*, a 'dicebuilder' in the vein of *Slay the Spire*. "But if you compare games from this year to 2019, there's an evolution. The games from Brazil are much better."

It's one thing to hear that from a local developer – it's another to hear it from multiple indie publishers, too. I spent time with several who were at BIG to scout for games, and all of them were optimistic about the projects they were seeing in private. A few games I played at BIG were promising, but the ones you're going to be playing in a couple years? They may well put studios on the map.

"Hands down, the quality of the projects themselves has grown significantly," said David Martinez, co-founder of *Sable* publisher Raw Fury. "LATAM has accrued a lot of knowledge over the years and devs readily share these insights with each other. It's a tight-knit community that has caught up pretty quickly to the decades-old scenes in North America and Europe both in talent and in scope. Teams of two to three people I met at BIG 2017 have transformed into teams of 20-30 in 2022. Seeing the exponential growth of the region has been nothing short of astounding."

Dr Matthew White, the founder of game label Whitethorn (publisher of last year's postal vacation

BIG Festival

Since starting in 2012, Brazil's International Games Festival has become the biggest games event in Latin America. After two years exclusively online, it returned to a convention centre in São Paulo and rebranded as the "Best International Games" festival. Like E3, it's open to the public but also a venue for business meetings between local and international game developers.

FAR LEFT: BIG awards indie games in a number of categories like design, narrative, and impact.

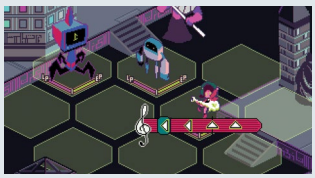
LEFT: Now *this* is PC gaming.

CHEAT SHEET *Four Brazilian indies to keep an eye on*

ROGUE SNAIL
RELIC HUNTERS LEGEND
Venturelli's studio is making this cute 2D looter shooter with Gearbox.

LITTLE LEO GAMES
ASTREA
The first game from this indie team is a stunner, riffing on *Slay the Spire*.

BITCAKE STUDIO
HOLODRIVE
After making a shooter and a VR puzzler, BitCake now has a chaotic cat game.



MOONANA
KEYLOCKER
This highlights the punk bit of cyberpunk, giving you a guitar to fight with.

adventure *Lake*), had a packed schedule at BIG. "The developers have this massive drive, willing to bend over backwards to show you titles," he said. "We saw a whole bunch that ran the gamut from first-ever indie game to established studios with existing IP doing something new – tons of variety. I think the biggest drive for us is always the variety. There are several that piqued our interest."

THINK BIG

White wasn't the only publisher I talked to who commented on the range of games in development they saw at BIG. While it's impressive that the tiny indies of half a decade ago have successfully grown bigger studios, there's also something special about the way BIG gets less experienced developers in front of potential publishers, too.

Meetings at the festival are essentially speed dating for game pitches: a hundred small tables are crowded into a long room, with 20 minutes on the clock for each sit down. Find your numbered table, shake hands and make your case; before long a tone will ring out over the speakers. Then it's time to shuffle.

"I got some pitches that ranged from $1 million or so down to like $10,000," said Ted Hentschke, founder of horror publisher DreadXP. "It was cool to be able to meet truly indie devs in what's typically a higher barrier for entry environment. There's a certain sliding scale that 'indie' has been going down for some time as budgets grow and grow, and a new batch of indie has come from places like itch.io to fill that truly indie micro-budget void. But in the larger industry these titles are still largely overlooked. So to go to a place where I can hop from an 'AA' indie pitch to something made by two guys in a few months is a truly unique opportunity."

MEETINGS AT THE FESTIVAL ARE SPEED DATING FOR GAME PITCHES

Hentschke got more out of BIG than just a game he's interested in signing: he also met a developer he wants to integrate into future DreadXP projects. And if Martinez signs the games he hopes to for Raw Fury, I suspect they'll make a splash at a future E3.

"I don't want to jump ahead of myself, but I saw some extraordinary games I'd really like in our portfolio ranging from the cutest co-op brawler I've ever seen to a savage FPS that must've been created during a fever dream," he said. "The spectrum of games in development was staggering."

After two years as an online-only event, there was a vibe of excitement at BIG from everyone meeting, and pitching, in person once again. "I feel like this year is going to be a shift here in Brazil, for the better," Mark Venturelli told me.

"We had a pretty rough two to three years because of the pandemic. Brazil always had a brain drain issue – people who are from my generation are in big companies overseas, working in the Valves and Blizzards and Ubisofts of the world. People who get really good at making games here, they go overseas. During the pandemic that got a lot worse, and that also made it harder for new studios to do their thing... but the future's bright now, I'm sure of it." ■

Wes Fenlon

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

SFX EDUCATION

Audio director **PAUL WEIR** on making No Man's Sky sound out of this world

Sound design, music composition, voice direction... Paul does it all, and pretty much anything else to do with audio that you can think of. He's a free agent with experience in games, film, radio, advertising, and more; and he's currently single-handedly working on *No Man's Sky*'s audio for Hello Games.

Paul had an unorthodox route into the game industry. Using a BBC course in TV directing as a springboard to radio work and composing, he went for a job interview at the now-defunct Perfect Entertainment, mainly for job interview practice. He didn't get the job, but while he was there, he passed a tape of some of his self-written music to their composer. A week later, Paul signed on for unemployment benefits. An hour or so after this, his phone rang. It was the composer, who'd found him a job. Paul describes his break as very lucky, but also points out that sustaining his work as a career is "where the real work is".

If you want an example of how and why Paul has managed to stay in the audio business for over 25 years, you need look no further than the work that went into generating *No Man's Sky*'s alien speech. "[We were] physically modelling creature vocals, like a vocal tract," says Paul. "There's been a lot of research on vocal tracts, and how humans make sounds ... there's no sound generation component to [our model]. It literally uses force and energy and vibrations, so it's like a feedback loop ... we have loads of inputs coming into it. So it might be like, what *type* of creature is it? What size is it? What size is its head in relation to its body? What is its emotional state?

"There's a kind of performance capture element to it. So we built a whole MIDI control surface, with like 30 different elements to it. I can literally play with it as an instrument, capture that, and that would be ... the core performance data, which then gets manipulated live anyway."

With decades of professional work across multiple media since, and his own company (Earcom), Paul has plenty of experience working behind the audio curtain. When it comes to games, the approach to audio can vary wildly, although this isn't necessarily purely down to company size. "Some of the big, like, Sony, Microsoft titles might have 20, 30, even more people involved in the audio," he says. "Biggest team I've ever worked in is probably about six. [But] the vast majority of my projects, it's just me. It's almost always just me. It looks like you would get in film ... I'm generalising now, but *generally* the British approach, the European approach, is more that you have fewer sound designers, but they just kind of work on the whole film. And that's kind of how I like to work."

SOUND IT OUT

The nature of business means that the client will decide the shape of the process to a degree. "Different studios have different cultures," he explains. "Sometimes it'll be more like, 'Here's a list of sounds,' or, 'This is the game, just add some sounds to it.' I much prefer to work with everyone – design, art, code – and really see how we can best use audio to enhance the game."

Paul worked on every aspect of *No Man's Sky* in terms of audio, which meant that he also had a hand in the music, which wasn't added until about six months before release. "We built our own music system, so that it would dynamically create the music based on small snippets. And it was a great, very collaborative experience with 65days [instrumentalist band 65daysofstatic] where I kind of specified the system, and they filled it with all their music, and also wrote a soundtrack album. The whole thing actually works spectacularly well ... I have a particular interest in generative music, that's an area I've done a lot of work in. Obviously games is a perfect medium [for that]."

No Man's Sky offers plenty of colourful, procedurally generated wonders to gawk at (and run from); and now you know that some of the work behind the sound design is just as unique, inventive, and surprising. ■

Luke Kemp

SPACED OUT

An unorthodox soundtrack requires an unorthodox band

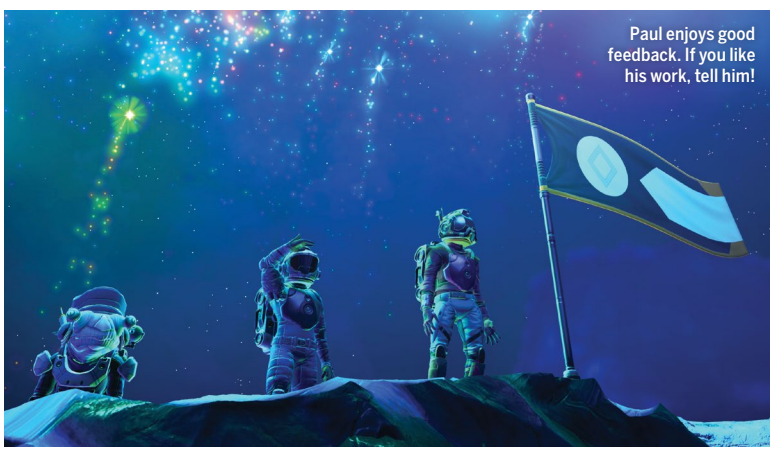
GOOD DAY

65daysofstatic are a four-piece instrumentalist band from Sheffield. They've released eight non-game-related albums (including an alternate soundtrack to the 1972 movie Silent Running), as well as several singles and EPs.

MOON ROCK

The official *No Man's Sky* soundtrack from 65daysofstatic (No Man's Sky: Music For An Infinite Universe) consists of 16 songs, totalling almost two hours of music. It had a limited vinyl release via Iam8bit.

"I HAVE A PARTICULAR INTEREST IN GENERATIVE MUSIC"



Paul enjoys good feedback. If you like his work, tell him!

ABOVE: "Something I really enjoy is advising on the technology," says Paul.

LEFT: I like to imagine that it's dancing to the music.

Incoming

THE BIGGEST GAMES ON THE WAY

1 month

STEELRISING

RELEASE September 8 | **DEVELOPER** Spiders

Scrappy RPG developer Spiders are back with a strange clockpunk tale that sees you playing a robotic woman fighting her way through Paris during the French Revolution.

EVIL WEST

RELEASE September 20 | **DEVELOPER** Flying Wild Hog

We should've banned developers from using the word 'West' years ago. This one's unrelated to *Hard West*, *Weird West*, *West of Loathing*, or *West of Dead*.

DELIVER US MARS

RELEASE September 27 | **DEVELOPER** KeokeN Interactive

An atmospheric and perilous adventure across the surface of the red planet, as you journey to discover what became of missing colony ships.

3 months

MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASE October 7 | **DEVELOPER** Firaxis Games

The creators of *XCOM* bring their turn-based strategy expertise to a superhero RPG with tactical battles, deck-building, and movie nights with Captain Marvel.

COMPANY OF HEROES 3

RELEASE November 17 | **DEVELOPER** Relic Entertainment

Explosive WWII action that seems poised to revive not only the series, but the whole RTS genre. Our hands-on previews have us convinced this is going to be a blinder.

WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

RELEASE September 13 | **DEVELOPER** Fatshark

Battle through the grim darkness of the far future with three of your mates, and some very big guns, as a cult of a diseased Chaos god swarms to stop you.

6 months

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

RELEASE December 2 | **DEVELOPER** Striking Distance Studios

Veterans of iconic horror game *Dead Space* are working on this spiritual successor, in which you have to try and escape a monster-infested prison on Jupiter's moon.

FORSPOKEN

RELEASE January 24 | **DEVELOPER** Luminous Productions

A modern day New Yorker is transported to a fantasy realm, where her new magical powers come with the small catch that she has save the world.

CLASH: ARTIFACTS OF CHAOS

RELEASE November | **DEVELOPER** ACE Team

A third-person brawler follow-up to the wonderfully bizarre *Zeno Clash* games, starring a mutant warrior fighting to protect a cute little furry... thing from harm.

12 months+

STARFIELD

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

It sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG – but if '*Skyrim* in space' can pull off its grand ambitions, it'll be worth the wait.

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Rocksteady Studios

The long-awaited follow-up to the *Batman: Arkham* series, starring Harley Quinn and other super-villains forced to fight evil versions of Superman, The Flash, and more.

REDFALL

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Arkane Austin

The team behind *Prey* brings us a co-op, open world FPS about a team of vampire hunters, each with their own supernatural powers.

DELAYED

PRECIOUS TIME

The Lord of the Rings: Gollum has been pushed back by "a few months" for further polish, though the studio hasn't yet announced a new release date.

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NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
Winter 2022	Digital Extremes	In-house	warframe.com

WARFRAME: THE DUVIRI PARADOX

Digital Extreme is getting into the time loop business

This year's TennoCon was about more than just the future of *Warframe*. There was the announcement of *Soulframe* (see p24), and also the surprise announcement of a new update, *Veilbreaker,* to launch before new expansion *The Duviri Paradox*. This will be under a new creative director, former *Warframe* community director Rebecca Ford.

When Ford started out ten years ago, she could not have foreseen the bright future that lay ahead for the game and the company. She has played a vital role in shaping the special relationship *Warframe* has with its community, fostering stories like that of Filipino artist Lendel Fajardo, who managed to support his family with the money made from skins he created through the TennoGen program.

"I was a 20-year-old intern and now I'm the creative director of *Warframe*," she says. "I'm sitting in this new hot seat where I need to be really careful about all the good will we've built up. All the rapport, and all the long term relationship building with the community, is only as good as your next mistake." Though Ford feels grateful that it isn't all on her shoulders. "I know that if I trip, I'm not gonna faceplant because I have an amazing team."

Ford's move from community management to steering the *Warframe* ship actually started six months ago, leading April's *Angels of the Zariman* update – an addition that I found tantalising in all the best ways, with a sense of place and atmosphere that elevates *Warframe* so high. While Ford takes pride in it, she also feels responsible for shortcomings like its bugs at launch. "I should've held it another week … but there were a lot of reasons we couldn't. And then I started to understand those reasons. Every little thing matters. You're making a hundred micro decisions a day and then they add up. We can't move this update. By the end of the [launch] week we had a more stable build, but that's what stung the most."

A WEREWOLF-INSPIRED DESIGN DRAWN UP BY JOE MADUREIRA OF DARKSIDERS FAME

PRIME-TIME

The near future of the game had already been touched upon before TennoCon, with the announcement of the next warframe to get the Prime treatment: Khora, alongside her pet Venari. Digital Extremes also teased a completely new warframe: a werewolf-inspired design drawn up by Joe Madureira of *Darksiders* fame. Though Ford was sure to insist that just doing a straightforward werewolf wouldn't be weird enough for the game, and promises they'll have some fun twists on the concept.

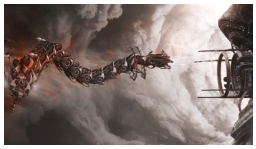
NEW INFO

Another update will fill the void before *Duviri* arrives, the surprise announcement that is *Veilbreaker.* The update is split into two: on the one hand you have a single-player experience in the role of Kahl-175, doing the titular veilbreaking as he leads an uprising against the forces of Narmer. On the other, *Veilbreaker* will also bring back the deadly Archons from *The New War* as weekly missions tasking players with taking on one of the formidable foes.

CATCH-22

More than anything else, at the forefront of fan's minds has been *The Duviri Paradox*, and Digital Extremes has finally pulled back the curtain to show a substantial part of the huge open world update. After years of speculation, fans are finally beginning to understand what *Duviri* is about. At least, some of it. And it still looks absolutely wild.

"This is the Drifter's story," Ford says, confirming the return of the player character's alternate reality self, first introduced in *The New War*. "The theme and personal story for this is one of making meaning of a life you feel you



have no control over. We're really playing with the darkness ... a lot of people feel like there's no point to trying because someone else is in control, someone else is responsible for removing all colour from your life and all colour from the world. And sometimes you might not realise it, but people want to help and it's on you to accept that help."

The expansion will see players taking the Drifter (possibly at some time in their past) through Duviri, a strange, near colourless realm in the void where they're trapped in an endless cycle. They can't die but they can't escape. Time loops sure are becoming popular in games, huh? Duviri is ruled over by Dominus Thrax, a king whose very mood shapes the world each day, and the person keeping the Drifter there. Ford hints they may be more familiar than they seem.

"If the Drifter is the version of the Tenno who didn't get rescued, what else could be out there?"

OUT OF FRAME

Regardless of who they are, their kingdom is an outlandish landscape, composed of floating islands, gigantic statues, and 'dragons' that resemble giant serpents made of clockwork parts. Though most of the colour has been sucked out of it, some still bleeds through. What *Warframe* can be and how it can look has expanded significantly over the decade, but this is its boldest departure yet.

"I don't know if we could have made Duviri three years ago," Ford says. "But because of all the tech and optimisations we do now, we get to make this weird island open world where you're gonna have all this space ... portals too, so there's going to be very warframe-friendly zones."

Runs through Duviri are built on roguelite elements, keeping players away from their powerful warframes and starting fresh, assembling abilities on each new day – though there will be overarching progress to make you more capable. "The idea of time and resetting time and days was always very integral to Duviri," Ford explains. "And the roguelite came about when we realised that if we're playing with time in a weird way, and players have all this arsenal, we can give them access to their builds and the systems they know in a way that lets them have a unique experience every day by choosing what will work for whatever the game asks of them in that contained, Duviri time-slice."

WHAT WARFRAME CAN BE AND HOW IT CAN LOOK HAS EXPANDED SIGNIFICANTLY

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

To get through this ethereal landscape you have a few helpers. First and foremost is your horse, a mount that can not only carry you across land but also air, as it flies gracefully through Duviri skies. Then there's a, erm... disembodied hand? Your guess is as good as mine (is it the Lotus' hand?), but it allows you to add colour back into the world to claim checkpoints for progress and to solve puzzles hidden throughout. It also seems to play a role in the use of Duviri's portals. Of all the wild departures *Warframe* has made over the years, this feels like the most significant. *The New War* paved the way for controlling other characters and, coupled with *Veilbreaker*, that's set to become a staple of *Warframe* going forward.

Everything about Duviri feels ambitious and vast, like building a whole other game inside *Warframe*. Narratively it feels like it's reaching for the stars too, weaving a time-bending tale that will focus on the very idea of a paradox and what that will mean, with players both continuing the story from *The New War* while revisiting events that seem to take place before the player character is even awoken. "In the chronology, technically *The Duviri Paradox* happened first. But it also didn't. Because then *The New War* couldn't have happened. So it's a very fun paradox."

It's not just for the story, as the time bending nature will allow players to play *The Duviri Paradox* even if they've not reached *Warframe*'s later content. It's still being finalised, but Ford mentions it could be accessible as early as completing the Second Dream quest, which is one of the first significant main quests in the game.

For Digital Extremes, its future seems to be vibrating with potential, as ten years of growing success has put them on the precipice of even greater things. So this bridging of past and future seems apt for *The Duviri Paradox*. In Ford's hands, I feel more excited about *Warframe* than ever.

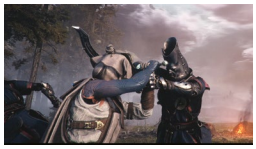
"My truest dream, and my heart, just wants to make awesome stuff with the people who have given *Warframe* everything," Ford concludes. "I want to work with them and I want to make it awesome. To do a good job. That's it."

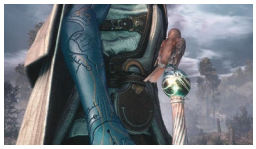
Samantha Greer

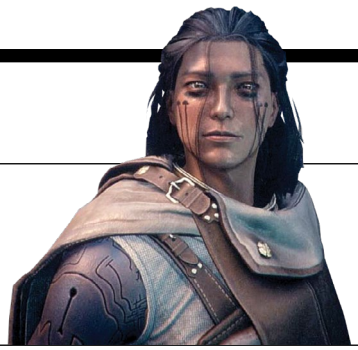
The surreal landscape is drained of colour.

ABOVE: Giant statues loom down at you.

LEFT: A flying horse helps you get around the open world.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC	Digital Extremes	In-house	soulframe.com

SOULFRAME

After nearly a decade, the *Warframe* devs have a new game

It's not the most original name is it? But it is a clear declaration of intent. One part *Warframe*, one part *Dark Souls*. Though like both those influences, it'll be far from simple. Pitched as an online RPG, this action game looks to task players with protecting nature.

Warframe slowly crept into heavy narrative territory over its decade of existence, and *Soulframe* seems set to pick up the torch it carried, already emphasising the personal journey of the player character in its reveal trailer. This hero is vanquished from a zealous order and cast out into the wilderness where they're rescued by nature itself. By the end of the trailer they're ready to return the favour, drawing a mystical blade from the earth and turning their foes to stone.

In the broadest sense it's typical fantasy stuff, but the strange visual designs as well as the developer pedigree point towards high concept world building. I'd expect more than a few twists and turns ahead if the mind bending plot of *Warframe* is anything to go by. Comparisons have already been made to Princess Mononoke and I think those vibes run deeper than just the big wolf that the character frees at the trailer's end.

Warframe emphasised a journey of self discovery, inviting players into a story where the very nature of the self and identity were scrutinised through big sci-fi concepts. I expect *Soulframe* will utilise the fantasy genre in much the same way, with the player forging a new literal and spiritual self on their path to rekindle a relationship with the natural world. The character's sword draws power from the Earth itself, mending small totems around it, emphasising the bond between them. I expect a lot of the game will be about restoring the world, undoing some form of pollution and mending spiritual objects.

VANQUISHED FROM A ZEALOUS ORDER AND CAST OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS

FIRST LOOK

OUT OF FRAME

Well, that and a bunch of stabbing big armoured lads in their weird metal faces. While not a gameplay trailer, *Soulframe* is clearly communicating a weighty sword combat FromSoftware fans can dig their teeth into, but possibly more to the *Sekiro* end of the scale, with the trailer's battle consisting of decisive blows rather than protracted combat. Though that could just be cinematic embellishment.

The most noteworthy thing here is the character's change of arm, going from the clunky medieval piece at the start of the trailer to a sleeker limb covered in engravings that can glow. I'd expect that somewhere in the game there's some successor to *Warframe*'s... uh, warframes.

Whether that would be some titular soul concept, with the player tapping different spirits to create unique builds, or whether it's indeed to do with this metal arm they wield, I imagine there'll be some way for players to swap out 'frames' of some kind.

BOW & SPARROW

On top of mystical powers, it seems like companions will be a core part of the game, building on the various allies players could bring along in *Warframe*. Whether these will be permanent helpers or wildlife encountered in the world who will aid you when needed, remains to be seen. Either way I'd imagine, based on *Warframe*'s increased additions of large open world spaces, that *Soulframe* will have its own big expanses to explore. Especially if there are no spaceships to ferry you around.

Much of *Soulframe* is a mystery but that's what makes it so interesting. *Warframe* evolved into this oddball beast and with that as a leaping off point, *Soulframe* could be among the most intriguing games on the horizon.

Samantha Greer

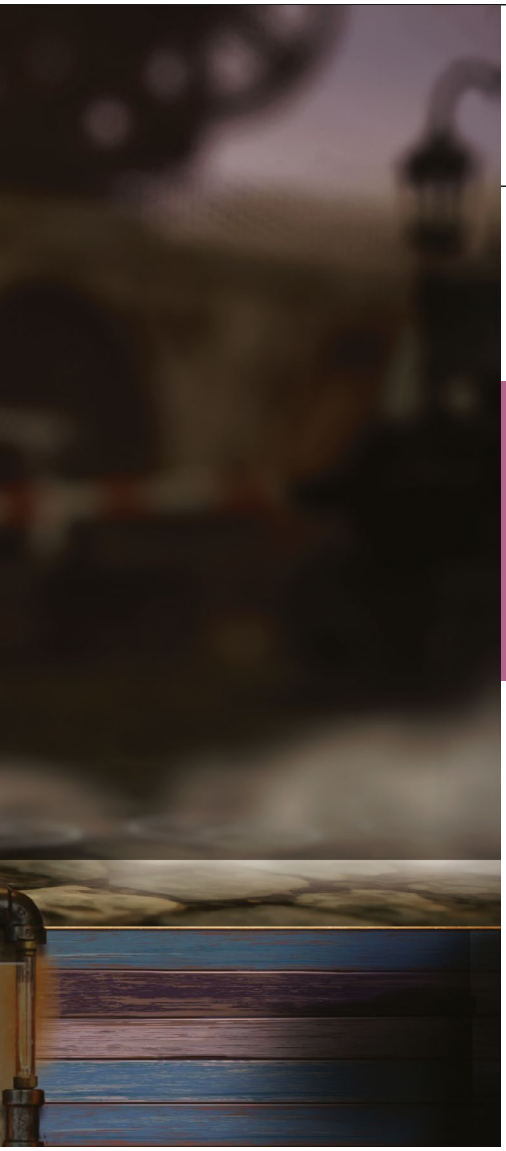
ABOVE: Three versus one man and his little sparrow friend.

LEFT: Call me bird brain one more time, I dare you.

Circus Electrique

ABOVE: Characters are more effective when their devotion level is high.

RIGHT: The corrupted Londoners are known as The Vicious.



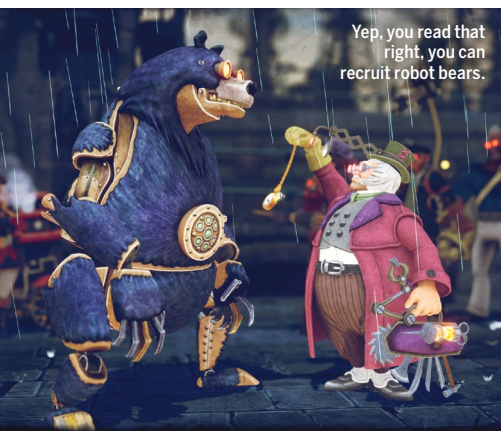
NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
September 6	Zen Studios	Saber Interactive	circuselectrique.com

CIRCUS ELECTRIQUE

Terrorising London with clowns in a *Darkest Dungeon*-esque RPG

This game gives you two main tasks: explore London, having turn-based battles reminiscent of *Darkest Dungeon*, and put on shows at your circus. Both require a surprising amount of strategy, whether you're chaining combos in battle, or looking for the perfect chemistry between performers to ensure your show is a hit with the crowd.



Of course, I threw almost all of that out of the window and decided my circus would be entirely made up of clowns.

The preview build dropped me in at the start of the game, and after being introduced to the world of *Circus Electrique*, where an electrical event called The Maddening turned everyday Londoners into killers, it's time to build your team of performers. Some will accompany you as you take to the streets to figure out what's going on, while others hold the fort and keep the shows going.

Your initial squad features a single clown alongside a strong man, fire-breather, and an escape artist, all of whom can fill different roles based on their abilities and where they are positioned in your team of four. That is, unless you do what I did. As soon as I'd raised some money, I dismissed them all and replaced everyone with clowns.

I put tanky clowns Emil and Timothy at the front of my questing team. Lodge backed them up with some useful ranged abilities such as Mock Throw, where he smashes a ball with his mallet into the face of enemies. If needed he could also jump to the front with his Taunt and be my new tank. Finally, Pablo sat at the back, the least effective position for a clown, where only three of his six abilities would work. But his job was just to heal, and occasionally throw a small ball at enemies in what has to be the most pathetic-looking attack in any game ever.

I PUT TANKY CLOWNS EMIL AND TIMOTHY AT THE FRONT OF MY QUESTING TEAM

As I reached the latter stages of the first London district, it became clear that my team of clowns might not have been the best call. In combat, you either defeat your opponents by inflicting enough damage to kill them, or you drop their 'devotion' to zero, causing them to flee. This creates opportunities for clever plays, but it works both ways: if one of your performers loses all their devotion to the circus they will run away, never to be seen ever again.

CLOWNING AROUND

When I fielded a more varied team, I defeated enemies using both methods, and the fights were quick. But with clowns, who are tanks and healers, it became clear there was a lack of damage-dealing on my team, and only one ability that would reduce a small amount of devotion, the Ball Throw. It was hilarious to see a foe run away from battle after gently struck ten times with a small ball, but it wasn't efficient.

PLAYED IT

Back home, the B-team, who might get a trip out onto the streets if another member needed healing up overnight, were consistently putting on middle-of-the-road shows, giving me enough resources to continue my journey but missing out on a lot of the cash I could've claimed with a more carefully assembled cast. Chemistry is key – Philip, my main event clown, would have performed better if I had included a robot bear earlier on in the card, but would have been worse if there had been an acrobat before him.

Had the demo not ended just as it felt like the power of my clown posse was starting to fall off, it's likely my lack of resources would have further compounded this issue. Experiment result: a clown-only team is not recommended. But with 15 performer types planned for the full release, there's no need to make the same mistake I did.

Mike Stubbs

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
£18	MinMax Games Limited	Hooded Horse	clanfolk.com

CLANFOLK

Hunker down, stay warm, and stockpile *everything*

Storage containers, when implemented well, are an invaluable asset in a colony simulation game. They grant extra space for the junk you're collecting, and stop items deteriorating as quickly. The *Clanfolk* devs at MinMax Games are aware of the many benefits of storage containers. But may have taken it too far.

Clanfolk is a brutally lifelike settlement builder, with obvious inspiration coming from the likes of *Rimworld* and *Dwarf Fortress*. Rather than being set on a far off planet or fantasy world, the game's characters toil away in the very real, very hardcore Scottish Highlands.

The winters are harsh up in them-there hills, and *Clanfolk* plays out one clan's frantic race to climb the research tree before the dark winter rolls in. The trick is to progress through the techs fast enough that you don't get caught with three mushrooms to tide you over when the lakes freeze up and the berry bushes wither and die.

You lead your clan through the years, from barely knowing how to wash themselves into the bread-baking, meat-smoking, Irn-Bru-swilling Scots you know today. There's a big focus on research, with that being second only to stockpiling. Stockpiling is king.

In my initial playthrough, I was thrilled to find myself unlocking all kinds of storage containers. A serving basket to keep berries longer. A meat rack to stop my scrummy eels getting covered in mud. There's even a haystack to gather up all the grasses I've been accumulating. Great, all those are helpful since there's a much lower stacking limit on floor stockpiles. And considering how slowly these bloody pawns build, there's a real need to squeeze stockpiles into the inevitably smaller and warmer spaces over winter.

CHARACTERS TOIL AWAY IN THE VERY REAL, VERY HARDCORE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

As the game went on, though, it started to feel more like a container simulator than a colony simulator. Not only can you craft haystacks and meat racks, there's also a hide shelf, tool rack, straw pile, stone pile, rock heap, branch pile, log pile, clay bin, a 'going place' (it's for poop), and even a flute rack. Seriously? A flute rack?

BASKET CASE

The thing is, all my moaning about flute racks isn't technically a complaint about the game itself. *Clanfolk* is a great little sim with some surprising features, and once you've got the tactics down the game can be quite relaxing. Really it's my own fault that my clan members spent most of my first playthrough building racks and stacks because I was overestimating. I know now that one gathering basket should do, there's no need to place seven when you first start. Just something to keep in mind.

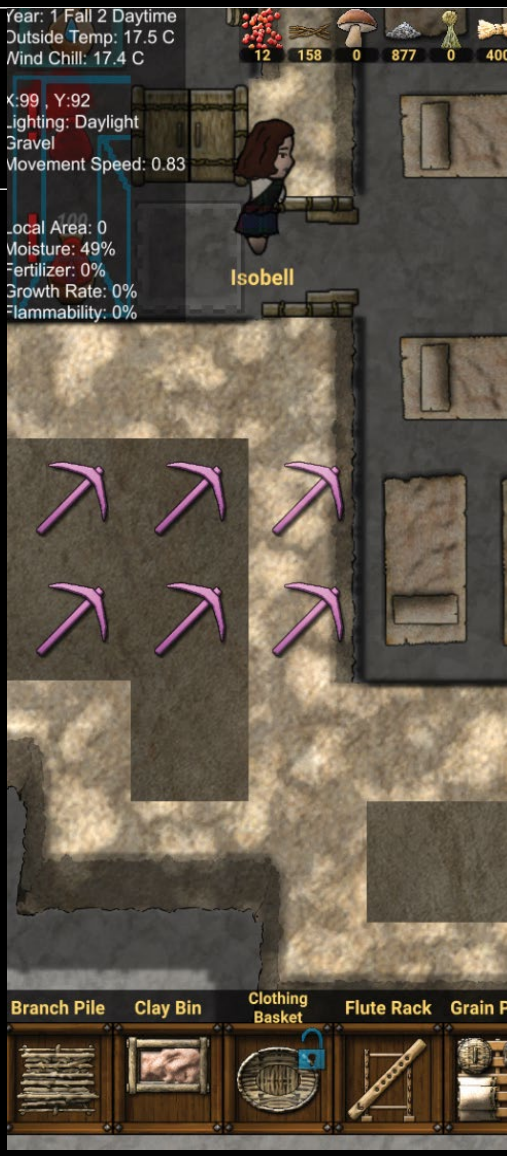
PLAYED IT

Of course, the game's not without its quirks, and it needs a little balancing. There's no way to remap controls in game yet, and the UI is a little haphazard. My main gripe is how long it takes for my clan members to figure out how to use oats. I mean, bread is such a basic thing, but somehow they've figured out the intricacies of pentatonic scales before they've got a single bloomer.

Avoid my mistakes, though, and you'll be able to enjoy the clever 'priority boost' function for getting clan members asses in gear, or the 'repeat build queue' feature for scheduling daily item crafting or harvesting queues. You might even live long enough to enjoy full bars in the 'auto-supply' feature, for keeping your stockpiles full to the brim, or scattered poop holes for fertilising your oats.

The problems are all minor things I'm willing to look past considering *Clanfolk* is still in Early Access. For now, this brave-heart is ready to get her nose stuck into some deep storage simulation fun.

Katie Wickens



ABOVE: Getting a little tight in here.

LEFT: The bigger picture.

Farthest Frontier

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
TBC at time of writing	Crate Entertainment	In-house	farthestfrontier.com

FARTHEST FRONTIER

A challenging survival city builder from the developer of *Grim Dawn*

I've played plenty of medieval survival city builders before, and the one I'm playing now is from the makers of bleak apocalyptic ARPG *Grim Dawn*. So I feel like I'm being practical, not pessimistic, when one of the first things I tell my citizens to build in my little town is a graveyard.

It turns out to be the right move. *Farthest Frontier* doesn't take its time putting my little peasants in mortal danger: they've only just started hammering together their first building, the town hall, when one of them is attacked by an vicious wolf. I'm pleased to see they're a tough group, quickly swarming the predator and killing it, but that's just the beginning of the threats.

GRIM PAWNS

There's another wolf attack, followed by a bear rampaging through the town and causing the villagers to hide in their homes until the one guy who owns an axe deals with it. And then the diseases begin rolling in. Dysentery. Scurvy. Typhoid. Cholera. Worms. Worms! Most survive after I quickly build a healing hut, but a couple of them perish. Also, and it brings me no pleasure to say this, but when I built a fence around my carrot field to keep deer from eating my vegetables, I forgot to install a gate, and one of my citizens who was weeding the ground got trapped inside and, ironically, starved to death. Starving to death on a farm. It's not a good omen for the town of Grimville.

STARVING TO DEATH ON A FARM. IT'S NOT A GOOD OMEN FOR THE TOWN OF GRIMVILLE

Despite these setbacks, my little village slowly grows. I start with a dozen citizens, but soon I've got enough shelters to support more and the population rises, and with enough food and some decorations nearby their shacks begin to upgrade into proper homes. I build a market that lets them buy different foods and the goods my buildings produce, like pottery and clothing. After about ten years in the harsh climate, I open a cobbler shop and my little people finally have shoes. Yep, they've been hoofing it through the snow without proper footwear for a decade. Like I said, they're a hardy bunch.

I've got hunting camps deep in the woods, forager shacks to collect eggs, herbs, and berries, and a fishing hut on the edge of a small lake. The problem with food is there's often barely enough – deer and boars will eventually move to other areas of the woods, so hunting camps need to be directed to focus on different areas of the forest. Likewise, berry bushes and fishin' holes become depleted from time to time, so keeping an eye on falling food production chains is important.

PLAYED IT

CROP CIRCLES

There's another problem: too much food. If my villagers collect a surplus, the stockpile will eventually spoil. Along with wildlife eating the vegetables I grow, rats get into grain supplies, and heatwaves, frost, and weeds can wither crops. There are counters to these problems: root cellars for storage, a preservest who can convert fruit into jam, and a rat catcher to kill pests, but each of those solutions require materials and workers, and if too many people have specific jobs there aren't enough general labourers to build and transport resources. It's a delicate balancing act.

The food struggle in *Farthest Frontier* is real, and it's one of the most challenging and interesting systems in the game. Crop rotation is important, and you can plan out three entire years of crops at a time on a single field. Each plant has different stats in terms of durability, duration of growth, yield, and other attributes. You also need to drop in segments along the timeline for the farmers to tend the field instead of just planting and harvesting, or else you'll be overrun with weeds. Farming is tricky and I haven't quite mastered it even years into

the game, with most of my crops yielding less than half of what I'd hope.

THE BEES KNEES

Gold is an ongoing issue for me, too – some higher tier buildings require gold bars to be built, and I also need gold to pay citizens to be soldiers and watchtower guards. But while I can mine ore like iron and gold, I can't smelt it into bars until I reach a higher tier of progress.

So, I do what I usually do in resource management games – I pick a speciality and go all-in. I decide my focus will be bees, partly because bees are cool but mainly because apiaries in *Farthest Frontier* are one of the few buildings that don't require a dedicated worker. I place them all around the map to automatically generate bee products, and my labourers collect the wax and honey from time to time. The honey goes into storage and the wax goes to a candlemaking shop I built.

Which I quickly learn is also a problem. Only one or two traders bring their wagons to my town each year, and each is only interested in buying and selling a dozen or so types of goods. The first couple of years after I dedicate my town to harvesting bee byproducts, my honey and candles just stack up in the warehouse. To top things off, one of my villagers is stung by a bee and nearly dies due to an allergic reaction, something I didn't even know could happen. Sorry I filled our city with angry bees, swollen citizen!

GOING FOR GOLD

But the biggest threat to my village isn't me and my questionable decisions. It's raiders. I learn this after years of stockpiling candles and honey, when a trader finally arrives who is interested in buying both. I have my labourers hustle my supplies from storage to the trading post and sell as much as I can, racking up tons of gold bars. And right then is when the raiders come sprinting out of the woods, brandishing swords and heading right for the trading post.

Um. Sheeit. I glance at the nearby soldier barracks, but no one comes running. Oh right, I had no gold to pay the soldiers so they all quit. Now I'm flush with gold but it's too late to do any good. My one short-staffed guard tower sends a few arrows flicking down at the attackers, but it's no use. The raiders run straight into the trading post, bash the door down, vanish inside for a second, then come right back out and run off into the forest with 478 gold ingots and a couple months' worth of smoked meat. My precious candles and wax are all gone, and the raiders took my gold and food.

I'm furious, and yet I have to tip my cap. It was a surgical strike, and the event really made me feel like the raiders had been huddled at the tree line all winter, closely watching my town before swooping in to rob me blind at just the right moment. Well, lesson learned. I build walls around my warehouse and trading post and move the guard tower into a better position, and the next time the raiders strike they have to stop to destroy the gate first, which gives my guard tower enough time to fill them full of arrows.

So, yeah. *Farthest Frontier* is good stuff! There's a tough challenge in the juggling of priorities and resources and labour, enough to keep me from playing at 3x speed most of the time, because when I don't keep a close eye on the smaller details everything can go to hell. While a lot of systems feel pretty standard for a medieval city builder, games like *Patron*, *Ostriv* and others, they're still done well here. Other systems, like farming, feel more complex and interesting than I've seen in other, similar games.

And for all my setbacks – at one point my trading post entirely burns down while I'm making a trade – that 40 plot graveyard I built at the start only has seven headstones in it so far. So while it can be a tough life, the villagers are pretty darn tough, too. Except for the ones who stomped off angrily instead of waiting in the village to die.

There are some really nice UI options, like being able to toggle on and off tags for buildings, citizens, and resources to get a quick look at extra info. You can choose from several different maps with varied climates and resources, and there's an array of difficulty settings, including a pacifist mode, to tweak to your liking.

I've been playing a build of the game a month ahead of the actual Early Access launch, but I only ran into a couple minor technical issues that were resolved with a quick restart. *Farthest Frontier* is shaping up nicely, and I'm looking forward to getting back to all the bees, trees, and disease it contains.

Christopher Livingston

AND RIGHT THEN IS WHEN THE RAIDERS COME SPRINTING OUT OF THE WOODS

ABOVE: Once the snow starts melting, it's back to work.

LEFT: As your village grows, so does the size of raider parties.

Dinkum

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER	LINK
£15	James Bendon	In-house	playdinkum.com

DINKUM

Start a new life in the Australian outback

Setting up my village near the lair of a fire-breathing Bush Devil wasn't the smartest choice, but I've managed to survive so far. That's just as well, because the wonders of the Australian outback are part and parcel of *Dinkum*, a new *Stardew Valley*-esque farming sim by solo developer James Bendon.

Tired of the drudgery of the big city, you start a new life closer to nature. Fellow adventurer Fletch is there to act as a guide as you get acclimatised to your new, colourful, but harsh neighbourhood. The first hurdle you might find is the default camera controls, though thankfully you can switch to mouse movement in the options. The targeting can be a bit finicky too, though that's really only noticeable once you start planting and watering crops.

PLAYED IT

Once you find a place to set up the base tent, Fletch informs you that you'll need to attract visitors and persuade them to stay if you want your village to be successful. You can do this by completing tasks or buying items from the shop of anyone that stops by. The deeds for their permanent store will become available once you've built up your friendship.

Sadly though, you can't just fund a new building with bananas and roo poo – yes, that's a thing. You'll need to start earning Dinks, the local currency, if you don't want your village to sink into debt. It's one of the aspects of *Dinkum* that I found most jarring, especially as you also need them to buy basic gathering tools. But I soon learned that Dinks can be earned by selling almost anything, and this is where the bug net and the metal detector come into their own – just keep well from any snoozing Bush Devils you come across.

TIRED OF THE DRUDGERY OF THE BIG CITY, YOU START A NEW LIFE CLOSER TO NATURE

You need a licence for everything you do in *Dinkum* too: a mining licence is needed to buy a basic pickaxe, a farming licence for farming equipment, and so on. But as you level up these skills, advanced licences become available which unlock crafting recipes for better tools. You can get licences to increase your tool slots and bag space too.

OUTBACK CHALLENGE

You might think the outback is all deserts and kangaroos but there are several different biomes to explore, each with their own wildlife and resources. Fruit is plentiful, so there's no reason to go hungry, and the many Diggos (doggo!) you see running around will often leave meat unattended so you'll have a good supply without the need of a weapon, which is handy early on.

Fishing is another option for food, though look out for danger before you start as my first experience went less than swimmingly. I'd found a nice riverbank, and was rooting through my backpack to locate the fishing rod when I was punted backwards 20 feet by an angry, charging crocodile. With only half of my health left, and even less of my dignity, I did the sensible thing and ran away unfortunately fishless.

It's not all hardship, though. You can change up your character's outfit with clothing items and upgrade and decorate your home with furniture. Attracting residents to the village means you'll want to keep it looking tidy, so planting flowers, setting down pathways, and generally making it look inviting and homey is vital. The contrast to the surrounding wilderness makes this activity especially satisfying too.

Dinkum isn't perfect but it's in a remarkably good state, especially given it's in Early Access. I've already lost most of a weekend to it, despite only planning to play for a few hours. So if you're looking for the next hot farming sim, it's definitely one to keep on your radar.

Sarah James

ABOVE: Copper and tin ore is pretty easy to find.

LEFT: No crocs in sight!

A TREASURED ISLAND

There was never meant to be a **RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND** – but Ron Gilbert is making the trip.

By Will Freeman

Ron Gilbert never really said he wouldn't ever make another *Monkey Island*. The series' creator certainly came close. In 2013 he penned a now infamous blog post asserting that he couldn't return to the point-and-click series unless a list of specific circumstances were met. In fact, so thorough was the list that it effectively put an end to hopes of another Gilbert-led adventure with Guybrush Threepwood. And yet fans still never quite gave up hoping.

And why would they? The *Monkey Island* games are famed for being subversive and silly. The series has something far brighter than a glint in its eye, and exudes an excited sense of mischief throughout. Through their jokes and puzzles, each *Monkey Island* game has delighted in toying with expectations. All that considered, many hoped that Gilbert was simply setting us up for another delightful punchline.

It might not quite have been his plan, but almost a decade on, that punchline has come. A brand-new *Monkey Island* led by stalwarts of the original's team is due on PC later this very year.

Focused development of the new game started around two years ago, but the story of *Monkey Island*'s rebirth began considerably earlier, when Gilbert struck up a conversation with publisher Devolver Digital's co-founding partner Nigel Lowrie at a PAX. Lowrie dared to suggest that Gilbert could still make another *Monkey Island*. And having inroads with Disney, he was in a better position than most to help Gilbert work with the current owners of Lucasfilm Games, and thus Guybrush's world.

MONKEY BUSINESS

Suddenly there was a very real opportunity for Gilbert to connect with the current owners of the world he created, and get past the business hurdles to making another *Monkey Island* game. Still, he needed to give it some serious thought.

"It's certainly something that I've wanted to do for a while," Gilbert admits. "But the realities of it are so complex that I just never felt like it was something I actually wanted to embark on, especially in terms of that business development journey side of things. So when Nigel brought this up, I was interested, but I still wasn't entirely sold on the idea. I wanted to make sure we had a good idea there; that we weren't just saying, 'Yeah, let's make another *Monkey Island*,' just because we can, but instead really understood what we wanted to make, and had something that could be meaningful and worth doing."

ABOVE: LeChuck's still up to no good.

BELOW: Guybrush is a little adrift these days.

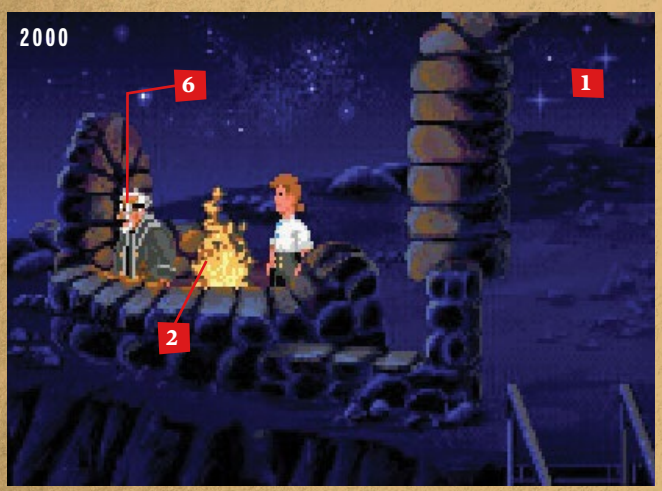
Still, with Devolver there to potentially handle the side of things that Gilbert was less enamoured by, the idea stayed with him. While he was the creator of the *Monkey Island* series, he largely stepped back from involvement after the first two titles – 1990's *The Secret of Monkey Island*, and the following year's *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge*. Gilbert had taken something of a steering role in *Escape from Monkey Island*, for example, but from 1997's *The Curse of Monkey Island* on, he was no longer at the reins. Now was Gilbert's chance not just to make another *Monkey Island*, but to revisit *his Monkey Island*, as shaped by those glorious first two games. So he started to make some calls.

CLICK INTO PLACE

Gilbert first turned to an old friend. He phoned Dave Grossman, a writer and designer instrumental in shaping those initial *Monkey Island*s.

FOCUSED DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW GAME STARTED AROUND TWO YEARS AGO

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE *Same location, but what's changed?*



1 The lookout served as an iconic opening location in *The Secret of Monkey Island*, and appears again in *Return to Monkey Island*.

2 The team was keen to avoid making a retro game that leaned too heavily on nostalgia, so the pixel art style is now gone.

3 The team made sure to maintain the form and composition of many of the most iconic locations featured in previous games.

4 One of the most striking improvements is to the lighting, which now brings more pop and presence to the world.

5 We don't know what this is (some sort of pirate-rat maybe?), but we hope it means some new puzzles span existing scenes.

6 The art team used a different style, but always tried to respect the palette and shapes of established characters.

7 In some cases the *Return to Monkey Island* team chose to reduce the detail in favour of clarity. It's actually much appreciated.

THE ORIGINAL GUYBRUSH THREEPWOOD VOICE ACTOR DOMINIC ARMATO GOT ON BOARD

"I called Dave and asked him the question," Gilbert remembers. "'What if we made another *Monkey Island*?' So he and I got together and had a long weekend. This was in-person, before COVID-19 and everything. We got together for the weekend, and we just went through all of the weird ideas he had had and I had had, and kind of gelled it down to something we felt comfortable with; something meaningful in that way we wanted. At that point we creatively understood that we could make this, and make a true *Monkey Island* game that would be really different and really good."

At this point, after listening intently to Gilbert's telling of the story, Grossman pipes up with a aside. "I didn't require nearly that much convincing. I was just ready," he says, dryly. Cue eye-rolls and tittering; a clear sign that *Monkey Island*'s defining humour is still very much present in Gilbert and Grossman's relationship. That's surely a good sign. However, Grossman and Gilbert alone could not make the entire game, so they started to reach out to some others who were pivotal to the wider series' success. The original Guybrush Threepwood voice actor Dominic Armato got on board, as did the early games' composers Michael Land, Clint Bajakian, and Peter McConnell.

ABOVE: There's an almost surreal quality to the new art style.

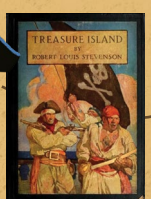
FAR RIGHT: Even voodoo shops are struggling on the high street these days.

ALL CHANGE

As for the details of what kind of game *Return to Monkey Island* is, Gilbert, Grossmen and the team at Thimbleweed Park developer Terrible Toybox aren't quite ready to share every detail. But they absolutely know what kind of game *Return to Monkey Island* isn't.

PIRATE PIONEERS

The works that first inspired Monkey Island



TREASURE ISLAND 1881
Robert Louis Stevenson's iconic story established the version of piracy that *Monkey Island* celebrates, such as all the treasure maps marked with an 'X'.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN RIDE 1967
Trips to the original Disney theme park attraction directly inspired much of *Monkey Island*'s atmosphere, and it really pays off.

ZAK MCKRACKEN AND THE ALIEN MINDBENDERS 1988
Working on this earlier project filled Ron Gilbert's mind with visions of a pirate-based adventure game.

"We really didn't want to make a retro game or a throwback, and that's not what this is," says Gilbert. "We certainly could have done that, and in some ways that would have been a hell of a lot easier to do. But we didn't want to do that. We wanted to build something that had a very interesting art style and so on, and not just remake *The Secret of Monkey Island*."

Gilbert and Grossman also point out that they have learned a great deal more about making games and telling stories since 1990, and have developed a far more thorough process with regards to putting together a point-and-click adventure.

Grossman notes that in the early days of their careers, they would just throw their ideas down, commit to them, and get on, guided by instinct and free of worrying too much about if things were incompatible, too sarcastic, or beyond absurd. That let the first two *Monkey Island* games feel so amazingly anarchic and utterly joyful, but there are many merits to a more precise approach, including delivering a more rounded experience. So Grossman worked to develop a model that actually allows for both instinctual silliness and meticulous planning.

"One of the things I do differently now is do this in more stages, working top-down, starting with planning the big things and then roughing in everything; that kind of thing," Grossman reveals.

"So there's a thumbnail pass where I just try and go through and scribble out the entire game as quickly as I can. I don't try to give anybody any actual words to say. There I'll just do a simple description like, 'We're going to have a conversation and we're going to talk about these things.' While I'm doing that a few jokes will occur, and I scribble them in. I think that approach is preserving that freshness of humour; the 'first thing that comes to mind' approach we had before."

Equally, it let the team be more particular and refined, guiding everything from early artwork to puzzle design, while keeping the broad project cohesive.

MODERN PIRACY

It's not only the approach to game design and development that has changed, however. The world around Gilbert, Grossman, and their team has shifted too; something that has deeply informed what *Return to Monkey Island* is.

"We're not where the 1990s was in society and culture, so things have changed in the world, and in how we make games," says LucasFilm Games' brand art director Hez Chorba. "With this game I can tell you how seriously DE&I [diversity, equality, and inclusion] principles were taken into consideration. We're making sure we're inviting everyone into this storyline. Not that the originals didn't. But now we're just making sure to try and see it through everyone's eyes, and understanding everyone's different perspectives. I can't tell you how seriously people on the team took it, because this is a *Monkey Island* for 2022."

"I think the storytelling – and the story that the team is telling – is very much a contemporary story," adds the game's executive producer, Craig Derrick. "And it's a story of how Guybrush exists in this world today, and what his commentary is on the changes that exist on the islands and in the characters that you meet in this new game. There's very much an aspect to *Return to Monkey Island* that's about something being different on the island. Something has changed and something has grown, and everyone within the game's world has grown with those changes. Much of the tension and the humour and the adventure of the game is really built on the idea of what a contemporary story of a wannabe pirate should look like"

Return to Monkey Island is about going back, but in the context that the creators, characters, locales, and even game development technology and design conventions are different now; informed by the passage of time and the context of a changed world.

BELOW DECKS

This *Monkey Island* remains a conventional point-and-click adventure game, however. Things have just undergone a modernisation. There's a new context-sensitive system for interaction, replacing the 'seven verb' model that was used in past games. Reactive dialogue trees and a revised inventory system are also in place, with the aim of offering a more intuitive, fluid experience that is also welcoming to newcomers to the form. There's even a hint system that strives to trump online options. And some of the action will take place in new locales such as Terror Island and Brrr Muda. Mêlée Island itself, meanwhile, is 'under new management', with a new youthful band of pirates taking over, and running things less than perfectly.

Guybrush's true love Elaine Marley, meanwhile, has moved on from governing, Stan is in prison for 'marketing-related crimes', Threepwood himself is adrift in life, and the old Mêlée Island isn't what it once was. Again, themes of change are present throughout.

And yet despite all that, the story actually picks up after *LeChuck's Revenge*'s infamous ending, which revealed that Guybrush and his undead nemesis were in fact just a pair of young brothers exploring the maintenance tunnels of a theme park, their imaginations seemingly running wild. But as Guybrush's family strolls off screen to close, LeChuck – in his childhood form 'Chuckie' – gives the player a red-eyed demonic glare to suggest all is not as simple as it seems. It was a conclusion that bewildered, delighted, and even infuriated, spawning countless fan theories. So if nothing else, *Return to Monkey Island* might finally explain what happened there. What's real and what isn't? But it's worth noting here that Terrible Toybox's creation somehow also ensures that it treats the later *Monkey Island* titles as canon, meaning everything could tie up quite neatly.

ABOVE: A new band of pirates has moved in.

BELOW: I'm sure the ghost chicken is nothing worry about.

POP-UP PIRATES

The themes of change that span *Return to Monkey Island*'s narrative and creation are perhaps most immediately reflected in the new art style. Rex Crowle of *Knights and Bikes* fame is leading the art team, having got involved after impressing Gilbert with fan art many moons ago. As with so much of the rest of the game, the aesthetic explores what a modern *Monkey Island* should be,

"THE COLOUR PALETTES AND THE SHAPES ARE DELIBERATELY VERY REMINISCENT OF THE ORIGINAL GAMES"

SPEAKING OF GUYBRUSH

Giving a slightly mighty pirate his voice

Dominic Armato was already a *Monkey Island* fan when he got the gig of voicing Guybrush Threepwood in 1997. Now he's back, and it's good to be home. "Looking at *Return to Monkey Island* as a fan of the entire series, and voice actor, while it's the most modern, most beautiful looking and most beautiful sounding iteration, at the same time it did give me this intangible sense of familiarity, and I felt that very intensely when I got into the script and into the game. Not to get too corny, but the title really is fitting."

while leaning heavily into the touchstones of its past.

"Even though we've been working in a very modern style, the colour palettes and the shapes are deliberately very reminiscent of the original games," Crowle explains. "You can kind of step back from your monitor and see that it almost looks identical to the early games from a distance. At least, that's the idea. And then you get close and you see that there's so many more details; there's so much more movement in there. That's how we're connecting the style across the years."

Adopting a more contemporary art style also let the team explore more ways to captivate players. And that's important, when so much of the genre is about scanning the art that makes up each room or scene.

"I think there is an element of point-and-click adventures that are a little bit like pop-up books," Crowle offers. "I love how with pop-up books, with each page that you open, it's just a whole new world. I think that's the really fun thing about point-and-click adventures; the rewards are going to a new section each time and getting to take it in. All of the environments are all hand painted and crafted, and they can all differ massively from each other, but like with a pop-up book, they are all about speaking to the player's curiosity and getting them engaged with these detailed environments."

Return to Monkey Island is looking both familiar and entirely new. It's offering a chance to revisit one of gaming's cosiest, eccentric places, where nostalgia and fresh ideas rub shoulders. And it happens to have the minds from which the entire world was first born at the helm.

In the end, the circumstances that let *Return to Monkey Island* come to be were rather different from those set out in Gilbert's blog post all those years ago. But as the master of defying expectation, and a maestro of conclusions that leave as much open as wrapped, what else did we expect? It might not quite make sense, but *Monkey Island* is back, and that's all that really matters. ■

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MOONW

Naoki Yoshida on how **FINAL FANTASY XIV** found its feet after seven years – and what's next for the behemoth MMO.

By Mollie Taylor

ALKING

It's bizarre to look at *Final Fantasy XIV*'s last 12 months and witness a game that has been suffering from success. It's a stark change for a game that, for a large part of its early life, was simply suffering.

"*Final Fantasy XIV* is a project that got off to a very problematic start," director and producer Naoki Yoshida admits. It's a well-known tale in games: a messy, unfun MMO crippled by conflicting ambitions across its team. "There were issues not only within the project itself, but also in terms of the company structure. All these issues erupted with *Final Fantasy XIV*. The consequences were that we lost the trust of our fans, our gamers, and the media."

When Yoshida (lovingly nicknamed Yoshi-P by the community) puts it like that, it's a wonder that I can now sit here in 2022 and say what a fantastic game *FFXIV* really is. But it's true – one hard reboot and four expansions later, and the MMO has become a juggernaut in the genre. It's sitting pretty up there with the likes of *World of Warcraft*, and even managed to entice a good number of players away from Azeroth and into the catgirl-thronged world of Eorzea last year. The so-called '*WoW* exodus' rocketed the game to its highest concurrent player count to date, helped by large *WoW*-heads like Asmongold and Preach giving it a try.

It's definitely hard to deny the effect they and other streamers had on the player boost. "Their impact on new players and the existing community has been tremendous, while current players have provided them a warm welcome," says Yoshi-P. Above all though, he's just glad more people are playing. "Whether they may be streamers or not, it just makes us happy to hear about more gamers coming into contact with *FFXIV* and playing the game!"

TO THE MOON

Even once the initial streamer hype died down, there was no slowing down *FFXIV* last year. Expansion *Endwalker* was on the horizon, offering something rare in MMO storytelling: an ending. It wrapped up the narrative that began back in 1.0, before Yoshi-P was even on board. New expansions always generate hype and rope back in old players anyway, but this time was different. Not only were we facing end-of-the-world stakes (and visiting the moon) in a dramatic culmination of 12 years of story, but people were racing through the game's four other expansions just to experience it firsthand alongside everyone else.

ABOVE: *FFXIV* has spent a long time cultivating a positive, wholesome community. These people are neither (just kidding, they're great!)

When *Endwalker* released in December 2021, servers buckled like they'd never buckled before. Queues were in the thousands as I, my friends, and many other players waited up to four hours just for a chance to get in and play. The servers simply couldn't keep up with the demand, and the superconductor shortage meant adding more servers wasn't that simple.

While the excellent expansion was somewhat undermined by the numerous technical issues, constant communication with the community throughout was key. Error codes were explained, reasons behind long queues were detailed in lengthy technical posts written by Yoshi-P himself. If there's one thing the producer has always firmly believed in, it's being transparent with the people that play his game.

"MMORPG Development/Operation teams should have open communication with the player community," Yoshi-P says. "Everyone struggles at first, and even now I feel immense pressure if I say the wrong thing or undertake a change in policy, but I believe that the most important thing is to maintain this approach in the long-term."

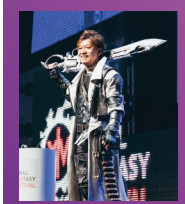
IN THE BALANCE

Though he's too humble to admit it himself, Yoshi-P's relationship with the community feels like an integral part of its ongoing success. His passion, openness, and genuine care for the game is something that's kept me coming back time and time again in my eight years with the game. His own *FFXIV* character – a female lalafell black mage – is as well-known as he is at this point, as he regularly jumps into the game to get a feel for new gameplay and to hang out with the community.

Not only does Yoshi-P play his own game, he tells me many of the devs do too. "Most in the *FFXIV*

YOSHI-PLAYS

Yoshi-P is the king of IRL glamours with his many FFXIV cosplays over the years



BLACK MAGE
From London FanFest 2014, Yoshi-P added a little Flare with his black mage costume. You can tell it's his main class, look how chuffed he is.

SAMURAI
Yoshi-P took to the stage at Frankfurt FanFest 2017 to announce the samurai job and looked damn good doing it. You ain't Sen nothing yet!

REAPER
I won't Harpe on too long about Yoshi-P's latest cosplay, as part of *Endwalker*'s reaper reveal at Digital FanFest 2021. It's fantastic, though.

“IT JUST MAKES US HAPPY TO HEAR
ABOUT MORE GAMERS COMING INTO
CONTACT WITH FFXIV”

development team are Warriors of Light themselves with varying playstyles," he says. "They bring in a multitude of ideas for new content, in line with their own playstyle."

Having a development team actively playing their own game definitely shows. Though *Final Fantasy XIV* is my first MMO, I've dabbled in many others since then. The one thing that always strikes me is how hostile other games in the genre feel compared to *FFXIV*. The game does its best to balance casual raids, dungeons, and overworld instances with hardcore versions. It's not an easy thing, to please both parties simultaneously. *FFXIV* doesn't always get it right, but it feels a lot more approachable in ways that games like *World of Warcraft* simply aren't. "You can see from the numerous MMORPGs around how difficult it is to sustain such cadence," Yoshi-P says. "Only after producing a lot of content in this way does it become possible to balance content tailored to the casual and hardcore audiences."

Finding that balance has been a challenge in itself, and something Yoshi-P and the team have been actively working towards. That change doesn't only happen moving forward, either. Small changes, such as culling the number of early game quests, were implemented last year to make the trek towards the endgame much more palatable. Earlier this year, the team went one step further and reworked a ton of the vanilla game entirely.

Not only were dungeons given a new coat of paint, but mechanics were changed and telegraphed to line up more closely to what we see in modern dungeons and raids. Tankbusters in *A Realm Reborn* now looked the same as they did in *Endwalker*, and there were no longer a handful of different, confusing ways of telling your party to stack up.

ABOVE: A whole new storyline is starting to reveal itself.

OLD BEGINNINGS

It's a great way to make an early game feel more modern, but *FFXIV* has been doing something else a little different. Along with *Endwalker* and previous expansion *Shadowbringers*, much of the casual content is now playable as a totally solo experience. You can progress through dungeons with other players, or you can choose to do them with NPCs instead. MMOs can feel so daunting to those who have never touched one before. I have distinct memories of a bad dungeon experience in *A Realm Reborn*, getting crap off my teammates and causing me to leave the game for a few months out of sheer anxiety.

That feeling is something *FFXIV* is actively trying to put a stop to. But that doesn't mean wider online features will be sidelined. "By no means am I trying to turn *FFXIV*, an MMORPG, into a game you can play completely solo," he clarifies. "However, I am aware that many have a fear of MMORPGs and multiplayer games because they feel intimidated about playing with others. To this end, I hope to reduce the pressure of that initial impression, and by allowing players the chance to enjoy the story on a solo basis, they'll gradually discover the fun of the multiplayer aspect."

It's something I know my 2014 self would have loved, and something that friends of mine who've joined have appreciated. Though the game has changed dramatically over the past decade, Yoshi-P told me his own design and approach to *Final Fantasy XIV* and MMORPGs hasn't. "The reason why there may seem to be a change is because MMOs grow and develop after launch," he says. "The design and approach changes with the degree of that growth. So, it's not that I have changed; it's that *Final Fantasy XIV* has grown."

FUTURE FANTASY

And grown it has. Seven months post-*Endwalker* and it's exciting to think of where the game will go next. Though its current narrative is over, new patches have already begun to lay the groundwork for the next story. With the stakes being so high over the last few years, the quiet respite has been a thrill of its own. But for Yoshi-P, there is no break or lull. Not only is he still powering away on *FFXIV*, but he's

QUICKFIRE ROUND

A few more insights from the mind of Yoshi-P

The toughest expansion to develop

"[Heavensward.] It was difficult for our team to settle on an appropriate pace at the time."

Favourite moment as director and producer

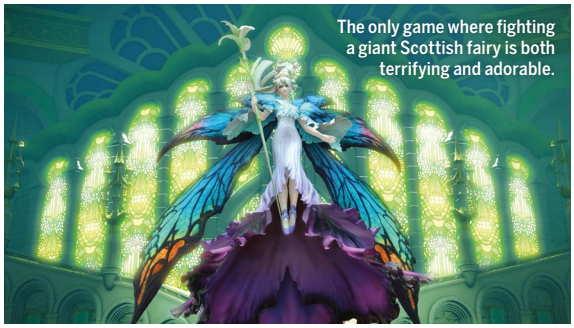
"The 2014 North American Fan Festival has a special place in my heart."

On the new adventurer plates feature

"It goes without saying but we do check out everyone's portraits on social media."

How to boost an MMO's success in 2022

"That's something I myself would love to know!"



The only game where fighting a giant Scottish fairy is both terrifying and adorable.

also the lead producer on the upcoming *Final Fantasy XVI*. The thought of working on one major project feels daunting enough, let alone two. Despite my concerns that it's all a bit too much, Yoshi-P seems to be taking it in his stride.

"Creative Business Unit III, which is responsible for the development of *FFXIV* and *FFXVI*, is home to many skilled leaders and managers in the field," he told me. "Thanks to their efforts, they've been taking more and more off my shoulders, allowing me to concentrate on concept creation, overall management, and game design. Having said that, with the exception of when I sleep or go snowboarding, I'm always engaged in development. No matter what task I'm in charge of, I'll always put my absolute best into it."

With another decade of *FFXIV* already planned, it's difficult to know how MMOs will look and how our own playstyles will evolve. It's a future even Yoshi-P is uncertain of, despite having done his best to outline it. "I don't think there is much we can do except continue to create what we regard as fun while carefully researching players' playstyles, changes in their free time, and their feedback," he says. "Our sole aim is that we want as many gamers as possible to play *FFXIV*, and this hasn't changed throughout the game's long history."

I tentatively ask Yoshi-P if he's ever thought about handing over the reins to someone else. Though I can't imagine the game without him at the forefront, I like many others have worried about his health and ever-increasing workload. "If someone on the team told me, 'Leave it to me!' I'll happily oblige. But the reality is, having seen the insane amount of tasks I handle, no member of staff has stepped up and made their voice known," he says. Despite that, he adds that "many leaders" have helped to take on responsibilities, and once again demonstrated just why he's garnered so much respect from fans and his own team. "You see, *FFXIV* isn't just my game; it belongs to all our members of staff. In this regard, I feel it's becoming less important about who stands at the helm."

"NO MATTER WHAT TASK I'M IN CHARGE OF, I'LL ALWAYS PUT MY ABSOLUTE BEST INTO IT"

While there may come a time where the workload proves too much or he decides it's time to step away, for now, Yoshi-P seems driven to create. His goal for *FFXIV* is simple: "Expanding on the concept of the game as a fun theme park that players can return to any time they wish." I for one can't wait to hop on the next rollercoaster.

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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.
Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.
Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.
Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.
Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.
Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.
Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.
Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.
Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.
Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.
Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews

Move on

One of the most crucial – and most often overlooked – elements of any action game is just the basics of how your character moves. The simple act of traversal, done right, can hugely elevate your experience – especially in the large open spaces so beloved by modern AAA games. This month's reviews are testament to that principle. *Spider-Man* is, in many ways, a disappointingly basic world to explore, but just swinging from A to B is so innately fun that you never want to leave. *Stray* doesn't just feel good to explore, it evokes the essence of a cat, using something as obvious as a jump to reinforce its themes. And in *Rollerdrome*, movement is perhaps more important than anything else, the core of the game's score-chasing, high-speed combat puzzles. If I never have to slowly jog to my next objective ever again, I'll be a happy PC gamer.

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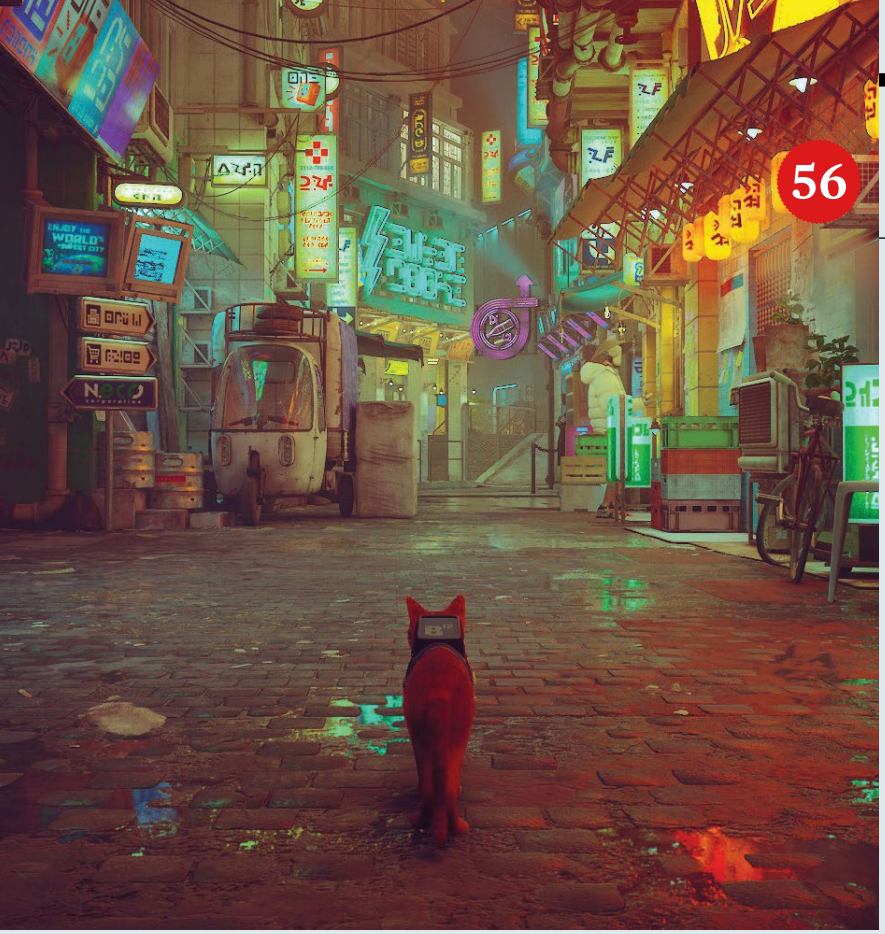
LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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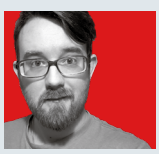
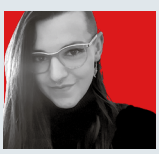


FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Higher learning
Currently playing
Two Point Campus
This month
Graduated from the school of hard knocks and mildly tricky management sims.

RICK LANE
Specialist in
Pest control
Currently playing
Starship Troopers
This month
Found a lot of bugs in the game, but it turned out they were supposed to be there.



SAMANTHA GREER
Specialist in
Rollin', rollin'
Currently playing
Rollerdrome
This month
Gets to review a game she likes every now and then, as a treat.

CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in
Amphibious barter
Currently playing
Time on Frog Island
This month
Started chipping away at the avalanche of frog-based indies.

MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Cooperating
Currently playing
Yooka-Laylee
This month
Revealed more about his relationship than the games he re-reviewed.

SIM KITTY

STRAY is a sparkling feline adventure that always lands on its feet

By Jon Bailes

The early novelty of playing as a cat in *Stray* soon gives way to a striking realisation – we often behave like cats in games anyway. Particularly in platform-puzzlers like this, our first inclination is to explore, looking for unorthodox routes up the sides of buildings, say, or jumping on furniture and seeing which objects we can manipulate. *Stray* simply makes such activities more natural, giving us the perfect form for the job.

The feel of your moggy is crucial here, and it's instantly evident how much observational work has gone into her animation. The slender ginger tabby is one of a small feline colony living in a disused industrial district long since reclaimed by nature. As the game opens, your gang waits out a storm in a concrete shelter, where you can instigate a little play fighting or mutual sniffing and smearing. These interactions are full of recognisable details – the way ears flick and rotate, the stretch routines – and if you like cats (as I do), *Stray* should have you at 'meow'.

Next morning you venture out with your crew, leaves still dripping from last night's downpour. You might pause to lap at pools of water, or employ a tree trunk as a handy scratch post, in between bouts of leaping up steps and across gaps. At first it seems overly prescriptive that you can only jump when a button prompt appears on a nearby ledge, box, or pipe, with a successful landing guaranteed. Yet this system is ideally suited to the litheness of an animal with measured aims, who cares not for frantic hopping but scans the environment for clearly reachable surfaces. And while there are points when *Stray* abuses its control by refusing to let you jump on barrels and boxes merely because they aren't part of the essential path, the overall result is a slick, satisfying loop of pause, look, leap that sustains the feline illusion.

You'll soon find a friend to give you some technological guidance

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A post-apocalyptic puzzle-platform adventure starring a resourceful moggy

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Blue Twelve Studio

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070, i7-10750H, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

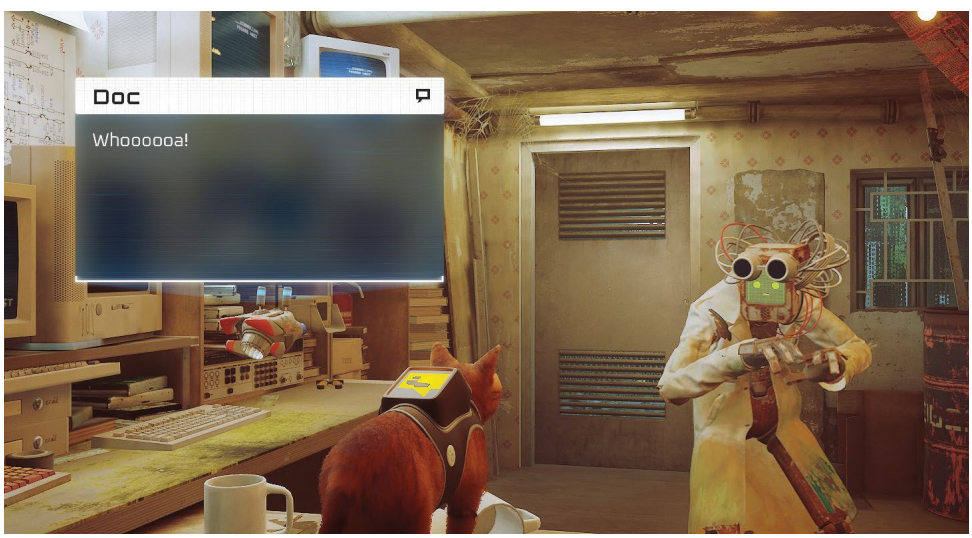
LINK
stray.game

NASTY PIECE OF ZURK

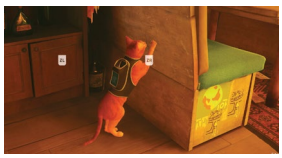
Indeed, the prowl and pounce rhythm introduced in the opening minutes could have kept me entertained for some while on its own. As it happens, though, the plot soon intervenes: a rusty pipe betrays our sure-footed avatar as she vaults a chasm, snapping under her weight to send her tumbling down then down some more into darkness. She's now stuck in much less idyllic surroundings – dusty, garbage-ridden ruins. Look up and you see a distant halo of light, from which mournful meows echo down. From such innocent beginnings, it's a gut punch. I don't recall the last time I cared about a videogame protagonist's fate so much.

What follows for the rest of the game is a journey to reach the top again, revealing the fate and legacy of an extinct humanity on the way. It seems that people built the underground city you've plummeted into because the planet's surface had grown toxic, only to meet their ends regardless, long before the outside bloomed once again. All that remains are their former android servants, functioning free from direction, and

TOP: And if one green bottle should accidentally fall...



RIGHT: Every robot dresses appropriately.



ABOVE: Barrel rolling is one of the more common puzzle solutions.

FAR RIGHT: The robots paint their territory with colourful murals and messages.

hordes of nasty beasties called zurks, which look like baby headcrabs from *Half-life* and exist merely to chew through anything that moves.

At various stages of your adventure, you'll have to pass through zurk-infested territory, usually marked by a coating of unsightly, stringy goo, as if a giant pizza had exploded. At first, the only way to survive the zurks is to run for your life, sprinting into the screen while plotting paths between streams of the squeaky blobs and weaving at speed to avoid their grasps. Later, you'll find them blocking your route and have to trick them into chasing you with taunting meows – a reverse game of cat and mouse – to lead them astray. None of this is especially taxing, however, and while it's certainly possible to get caught, these sections mainly serve to vary the pace between more unhurried travails.

DREAM MACHINES

You'll also soon find a friend to give you some technological guidance. Hopping along the city's concrete peaks, watched by surveillance cameras, a series of neon signs seems to be directing you somewhere specific. Follow the path and you meet an AI called B-12 who wants to join you in returning to the great outdoors. It uploads itself into a tiny drone and 3D-prints a harness around the cat in which to house

IT'S A CAT THING

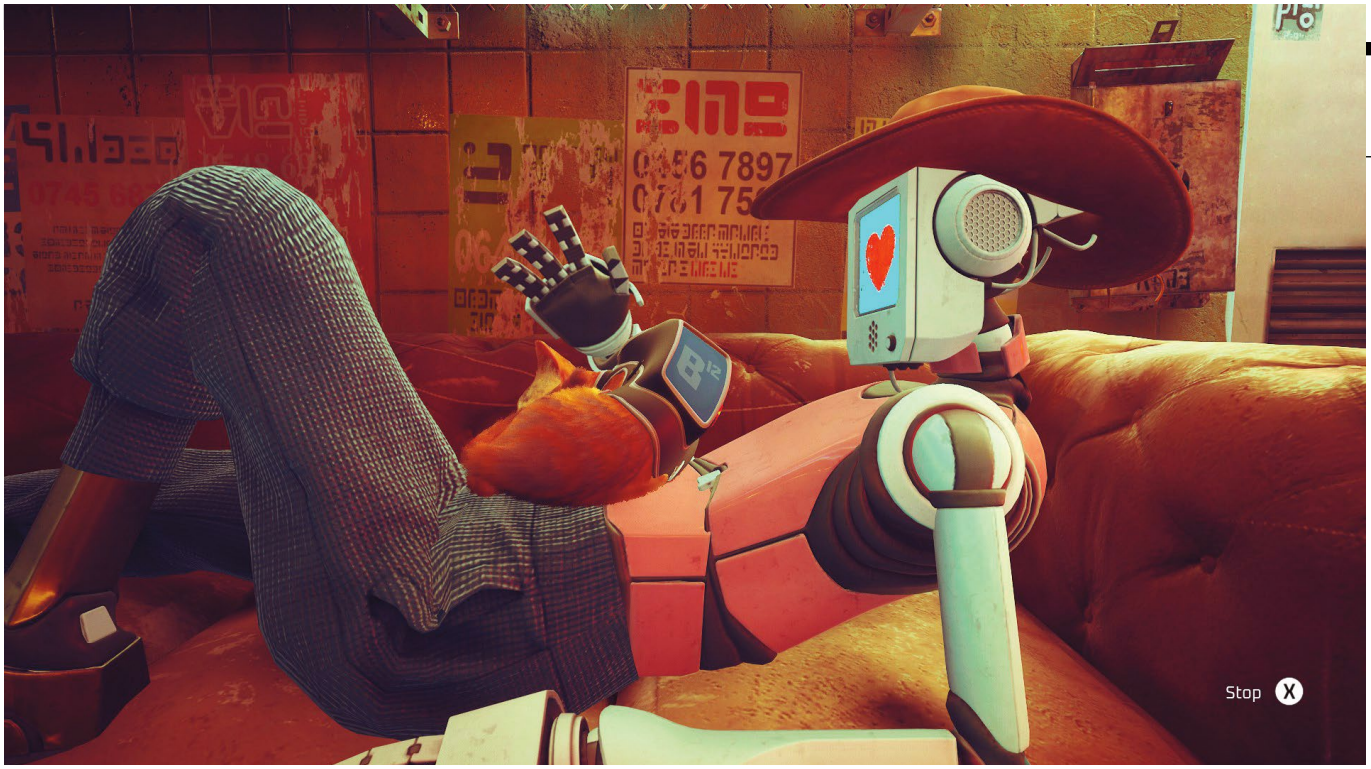
Achieve some of a cat's most treasured life goals

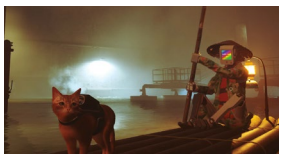
TRIPPING
Slip between the legs of a walking robot and cause them to fall.

PAINTING
Explore your artistic side by running around with paint on your paws.

COMPUTING
Hop aboard an unattended keyboard and ';[plo,kin-inoh67re3sxaz.

HIDING
Give in to temptation and jump into a cardboard box. They're the best.





TOP: Nap spots are everywhere, including on this robot.

LEFT: Careful exploration reveals 'memories' that fill in B-12's story.

itself. B-12 is now your partner, the mouth and hands you'll need to converse with robots, hack doors, and store puzzle-solving items – crucial in a concrete and metal conurbation where nobody thought to install cat flaps.

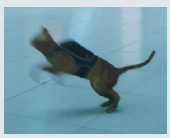
You'll rely on your buddy most once you reach a little oasis in amongst the mess where robots have made their home. This place thrums with life, even though there's none, with haphazard streets framed by neon signs that neatly reverse edgy cyberpunk connotations, bringing a healthy glow to an enclave robbed of sunlight. *Stray* now gives you space to play again, as B-12 helps you seek information from the androids and aid them in return. A barter bot will trade useful bric-a-brac for energy drinks, for example, while a guitarist wants you to seek out music sheets so she can play some songs.

TAKE A BREAK

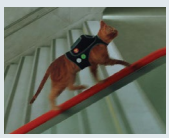
These androids aren't merely quest givers – they're an essential supporting cast. It's fascinating to see how the human-built machines have picked up on fragments of their makers' dead culture. They don items of human clothing, displaying facial expressions on monitor heads crowned by hair made from nests of wires – a fashion consciousness born of half-understood mimicry that nonetheless feels authentic because it wasn't socially programmed. At the

KEEPING IT REAL

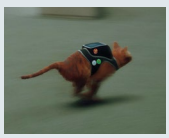
Authentic animations to warm the hearts of cat lovers



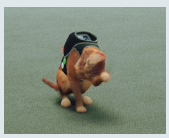
POUNCE
The leap of an athlete in her prime.



BALANCE
No banister is too slim for the kitty.



ZOOM
Legs ablur as the urge to sprint kicks in.



CLEAN
Personal hygiene requires time and care.

AND RELAX
Always curl up when it's time to nap.

same time, they have no frame of reference when it comes to meeting a cat, thus standing idly as you jump on their tables, knocking over their cups. In other words, they're like every minor RPG NPC you've ever met, except here they make sense.

MOGGY STYLE

It's also when you start criss-crossing this populated settlement and its interiors – jumping on a bar next to a collapsed drinker, or between bookshelves in a researcher's lab – that the solidity of *Stray*'s scenery comes to the fore. 3D game worlds are often an awkward combination of items that don't budge and others that fly or break at the slightest touch, but from the perspective of a cat that's how things work. Most things are too heavy to disrupt, except those empty bottles you can scatter, or the pile of books you jump on, then send teetering to collapse as you propel yourself off again. And despite occasional visual anomalies, such as clipping or brief animation glitches, *Stray* creates a believable logic to the way your fun-sized tiger navigates spaces.

Because of that, indulging your sense of kitty mischief and inquisitiveness becomes especially enticing. Wheelie bins and air-con units offer quick vertical ascension, and once you're up on the roof, can you resist pawing a paint can off a ledge? Or at ground level, how about entering a home and pulling down the curtains, or scratching the rugs? That's always fun. Yet rather than gratuitous, causing minor chaos seems like a side effect of natural curiosity, traversing a world that isn't built for your instincts. You aren't clumsily smashing the place up, you're expressing yourself, strongly encouraged by the game design.

For the rest of its duration, *Stray* continues to oscillate between playfulness and danger. As your determined cat gradually rises towards the surface again, you make new robot friends, helping them to reach their goals, get into tighter scrapes, and learn more about the history of this buried city in its richly detailed ruins. Throughout the six to eight hour run time, the objectives remain clear and simple, leaving you plenty of space to enjoy the worldbuilding and simply being a cat.

A barter bot will trade useful bric-a-brac for energy drinks

COOL FOR CATS

To a degree, this simplicity is a weakness, in that it feels as if there's room for *Stray* to stretch its systems and your skills a bit more, adding urgency to sequences of jumps, perhaps, or extra complexity to its puzzles. Because it doesn't, a few sequences get stuck in low gear, such as when you get to fight back against the zurks, a confrontation that boils down to repeated back-pedalling and shooting (and places the bland digital abilities of B-12 at centre stage, rather than our fluffy hero's), or don't evolve enough to escape the sense that they lack originality, serving up tasks that follow well-rehearsed genre lines.

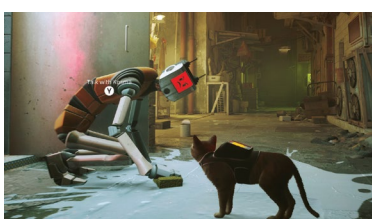
Still, *Stray* compensates for such lapses by ensuring each idea makes room for the next before it leaves a stain, acting as merely one part of an ensemble. But more than that, it remains a revelation precisely because it takes familiar adventure game tropes and makes them purr with smoother, cleaner mechanics. Rather than provide a roughly approximated simulation of people interacting with people, it builds fleeting but impactful relationships of mutual reliance between cat and robot. *Stray*'s commitment to this premise, packed with the nuances of both feline and android life, is an absolute triumph.

Throughout, playing a cat never stops being a utter joy. Perhaps the biggest endorsement I can give *Stray* is that even some defenceless stealth sequences in its final third are not only tolerable, but actually entertaining, which is surely a first. Like so much in the game, the character makes them work. What it lacks in complexity, then, it more than makes up for with agility and adaptability. If only more games had such sharp instincts. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Simple, polished systems allow *Stray*'s rich fiction and charismatic star to shine. Helps that the cat's just adorable too.

82



TOP: The best views often come while riding a bucket.

MOUSE TRAP

Save a cursed forest in **WITCH STRANDINGS**, the latest 'strand game'

By Fraser Brown

Back in 2019, discussing what genre *Death Stranding* slotted into, Hideo Kojima claimed it was something new: a 'strand game'. The defining feature of this new genre was forging social connections, which in the case of *Death Stranding* was done by delivering packages and linking up the disparate communities of survivors. A mix, then, of walking sims and community-minded games like *Stardew Valley*.

Despite being a brief, minimalist game where you play a little ball of light on a quest to save a forest and its depressed critters from a witch's curse, *Witch Strandings* is absolutely a sibling to *Death Stranding*. These sad beasties, who were once human, need a friend, you see, and for that friend to deliver food and medicine to cure what ails them.

Complicating this quest is the forest itself, as it would very much like to kill you. Rushing water, sharp thorns, quicksand, and hexes will get in your way, blocking your progress through this haunting world. Then there's the calm water, mud, and other terrain features that don't block your way but do change how you move. Trekking through water, you'll find you have less control over the cursor than usual, as you build up momentum and keep floating forwards even once you've stopped moving your mouse. Get stuck in the mud, meanwhile, and you'll have to drag yourself out, tugging the mouse to free yourself.

Opening up previously blocked areas gave me a serotonin boost

It's surprisingly effective at communicating the challenges of walking through rough terrain. After a little while, I stopped seeing the tiles, with my mind instead translating them into forest thickets, bogs, and lakes, which I'd then need to find a path through, or at least imagine what path I could create with the right tools. Scattered around the forest are myriad objects that push back against the threats the witch has put in your way.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A new strand game following in the footsteps of *Death Stranding*

EXPECT TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
Strange Scaffold

PUBLISHER
Modern Wolf

REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

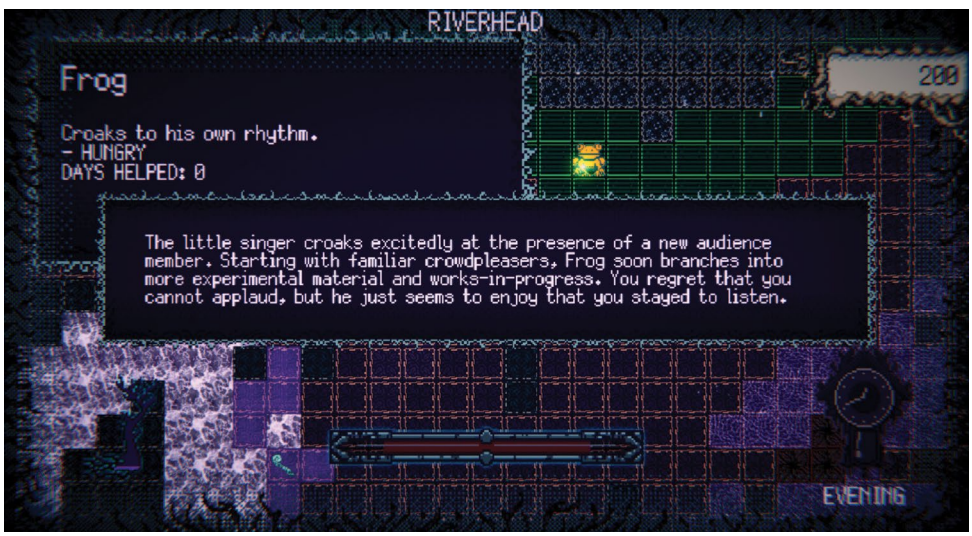
LINK
bit.ly/3SeGKOY

Initially, you'll need to drag these objects, one by one, and then deposit them in the most effective location. Conveniently, the areas they've cleared remain clear even once you've picked the item up, with the water, quicksand, or whatever only returning once you've plonked it down in a new area. Eventually you'll get some storage space where you can deposit an item, which means you can carry two at a time.

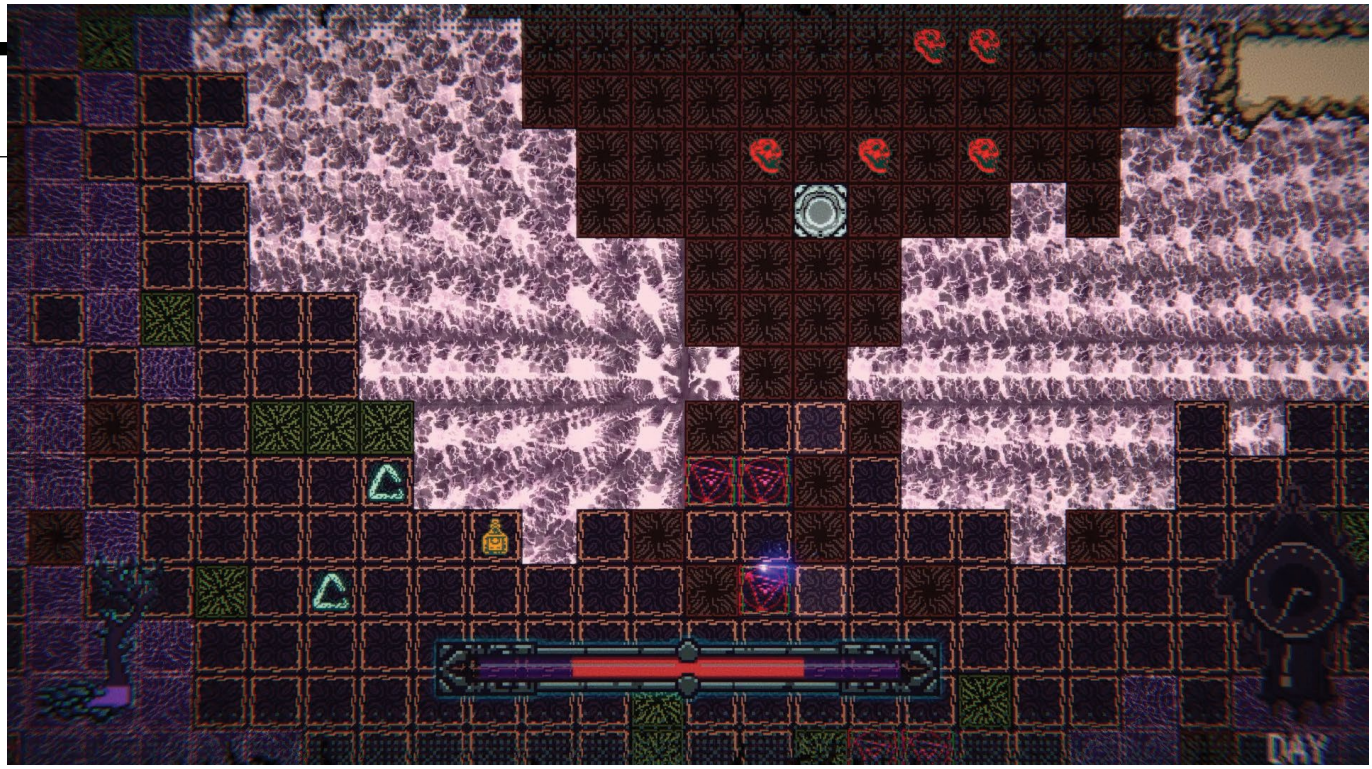
Once I'd created permanent paths through the obstacles and etched the map in my mind, I was speeding through the world with wild abandon. After hours of caution, I was free to let rip, swinging my mouse around like a maniac. And that's how I found myself drowning in the middle of a lake. This was in part because of my own recklessness, but *Witch Strandings* has to accept some of the blame.

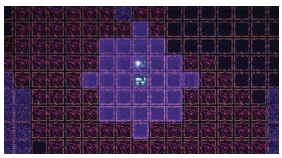
The screen only moves when you get close to the top or bottom edge, making it impossible to know what's ahead. This might be by design, to retain some mystery, but this limitation does not exist when you move left or right, when your view changes much earlier, so it seems like

TOP: Death isn't the end – just head to the light.



RIGHT: Frog deserves some applause.





TOP: Grab a red skull (they're actually seeds) to do some murders.

FAR RIGHT: The forest's heart needs to be nurtured by the power of friendship.

an oversight. This becomes more of an annoyance when you take into account the large health bar at the bottom of the screen and frequent notifications you get at the top, substantially obscuring your vision.

STRANGER THINGS

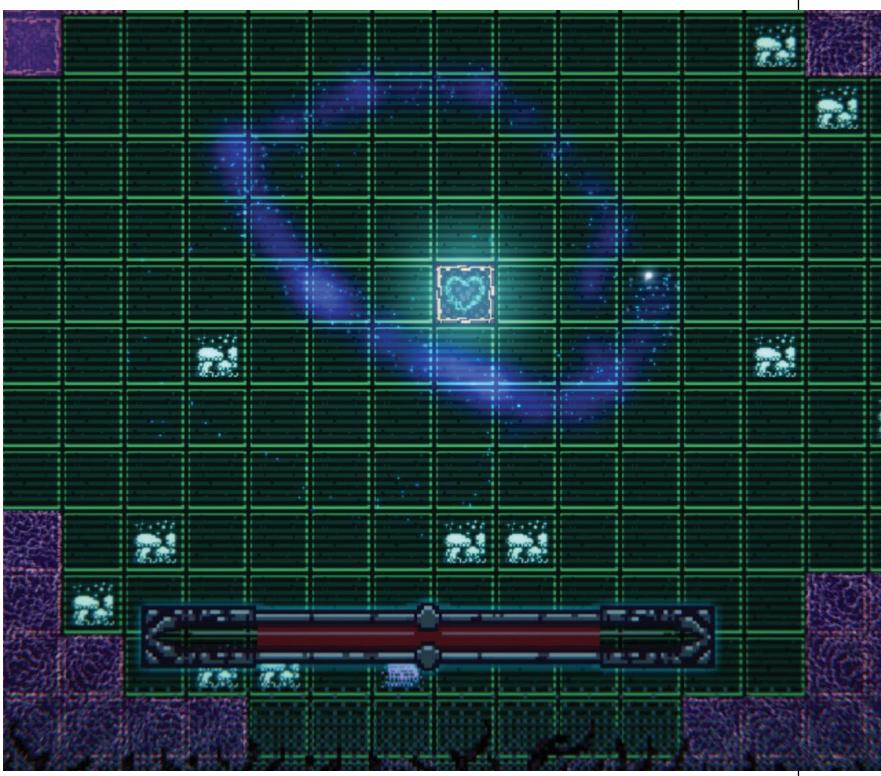
Finding routes across the map and opening up previously blocked areas gave me a lovely serotonin boost, but I found myself less interested in my actual quest. The discarded notes and descriptions of ruined buildings and sad animals are all evocatively written, each feeling like a snippet from a tragic biography or historical account, but they are all brief and enigmatic, never giving you much more than vibes.

The minimalism works in its favour most of the time, however, elegantly showcasing the pillars of this nascent genre without the complex systems seen in *Death Stranding*. When Kojima positioned it as the vanguard of a new genre, I scoffed. But seeing a game following in its footsteps, with such a different style but still clearly within the same family, I'm rather more convinced – and I'd like to see more. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Witch Strandings is an elegantly simple adventure that proves this new strand game genre has legs.

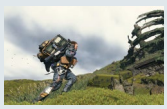
78



STRAND BY ME

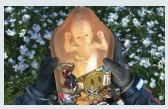
What the heck is a strand game?

COMMUNITY
Forging social connections is a major pillar of this baby genre, with NPCs scattered across a hostile environment in need of attention and care.



DELIVERIES
These connections can be forged by providing NPCs with what they need, forcing you to traverse the map in search of the most efficient routes.

TACTILITY
You're carrying a multitude of goods, you're getting stuck in mud, you're constantly interacting with the world at this extra-intimate level.



NONSENSE
Highfalutin nonsense might not be a discrete pillar, but it's present in the only two strand games that exist, both of which are playfully pretentious.

SWING TIME

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN REMASTERED is a mostly good port of a mostly good game

By Rick Lane

I honestly believed that *Marvel's Spider-Man Remastered* would struggle on keyboard and mouse. The web-swinging and slugfests of Insomniac's open world Spidey game feel so specifically tailored to a PlayStation controller that I couldn't imagine how anyone could feasibly translate it to the PC's traditional control scheme. Yet not only is the game perfectly playable on keyboard and mouse, in some ways it's superior to the PS4 experience.

Swinging through the New York skyline was always the best bit of Insomniac's title – with the *Ratchet & Clank* studio delivering possibly the best movement system in any game of the last decade. Traversing Manhattan as Spidey is equally enjoyable on PC, only now you press and hold left-shift to start and maintain a swing, interspersed with deft taps of the spacebar to add little bursts of straight-line speed. But it's the addition of mouse control that really gives the PC version an edge, letting you slip through tiny gaps between tenements and skyscrapers in a much smoother fashion than with a pad. Spidey's web-swinging was designed to make you feel like an experienced superhero in his element, and the mouse makes inhabiting this fantasy that much easier.

Combat, too, is surprisingly at home on keyboard and mouse, considering how involved Spidey's fighting style is. Basic attacks are assigned to left-mouse, and you can launch enemies into the air by holding the button down. Almost everything else is assigned within easy reach of your left hand, from webbing-up enemies with rapid taps of the E key, to deploying special abilities like healing and combat finishers with the first few number keys. The only console hangover is that Spidey's web abilities are chosen from a selection wheel brought up by holding down middle-mouse. But not only does using this quickly become intuitive, the fact that it pauses the action also allows a moment to figure out your next move.

The addition of mouse control really gives the PC version an edge

PORT OF CALL

The control adaptation is undoubtedly the most impressive element of Nixxes' port. In presentation, sadly, *Spider-Man* is not quite so masterful. The game benefits from unlocked framerates, while the addition of DLSS lets you whack that sucker up to 4k and maintain a smooth experience. But there are some serious issues with the game's ray-traced reflections – particularly on the medium setting, which makes puddles and certain objects like water-coolers look pixelated. The higher setting looks more natural, but you'll need a beefy PC for that – even with the performance boost from DLSS and DLAA.

In my playthrough, the game also suffered from a jarring audio bug in cutscenes, where the dialogue would randomly desync from the on-screen action, creating a delay of several seconds between what was happening on screen and what was being said. This didn't occur in every cutscene, but it cropped up in most of the longer sequences. It's unfortunate considering the quality and craft that goes into the story and characterisation of the game (something we'll get into later) and were it not for the fact that I've already played the game on PS4, this issue would have seriously hindered my enjoyment of the story.

The developer has promised a patch to hopefully address some of these issues, but at time of writing the PC port isn't quite the slam dunk that it initially appears to be. The same can largely be said for the game itself. Spider-Man is a five-star character in a three-star world. Peter Parker is arguably the perfect videogame protagonist – incredibly likeable, powerful but not invincible, and equipped with a traversal system so good it makes you want to explore every nook and cranny of Manhattan.

WORLDWIDE WEB

While I've already discussed it to an extent, it's important to stress just how good this system is, and how much the broader game relies on it to hold your attention. It's not just the way the game encourages you to maximise every swing, arcing

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantastic superhero simulator in an underwhelming open world

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Insomniac Games/ Nixxes Software

PUBLISHER
Sony

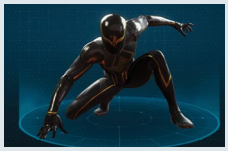
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

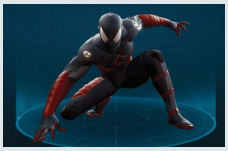
LINK
bit.ly/3SpdNja

SUITS YOU SIR

Three of our favourite outfits from Spidey's vast wardrobe

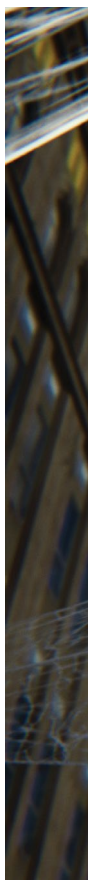


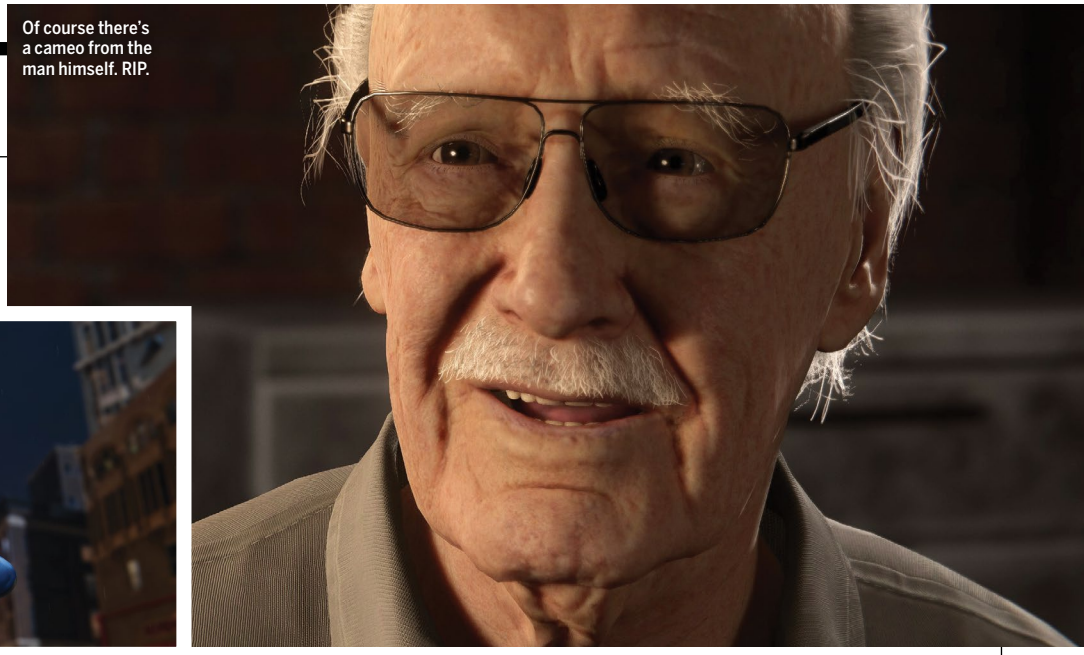
SPIDER ARMOUR MARK II
Turns Spidey into a working-class Iron Man with bulletproof armour.



ELECTRIC RESISTANCE ARMOUR
Good for fighting Electro and rewiring plugs. Grants a powerful electrical punch.

SPIDER-NOIR SUIT
Prevents enemies from calling for backup, and massively boosts Spidey's monologuing skill.





Of course there's a cameo from the man himself. RIP.

LEFT: Peter's friendship with Doc Ock is brilliantly portrayed.

BELOW: Now to cocoon you and drain all your fluids.

RIGHT: All the character writing in this game is first rate.

FAR RIGHT: Even by modern standard, Insomniac's Manhattan is a wondrous visual treat.

BELOW: Eat Spider-knee, you masked goon!

through the air, backflipping at the zenith, then plummeting toward the ground before hitting left-shift at the last possible moment. It's how Insomniac caters for every possible way you might want to move Spidey around the world. Not only can you crawl up walls, you can sprint up them or along them, and seamlessly leap from them into a swing. Run up to the corner of a building, and Spidey will automatically fire out a web to swing himself around it, like swinging yourself around a lamp-post to turn the corner of a street.

It's some of the most incredible animation-work you'll ever see in a videogame, and it all contributes to the pure wish-fulfilment of *Spider-Man's* initial hours. The opening sequence, which sees you battling through the headquarters of Kingpin, is a spellbinding statement of intent, both a stunning extended set-piece and an impressively comprehensive tutorial. Afterward, the game gives you space to enjoy the fantasy of being a friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man, zipping around the city, foiling muggings and robberies, halting car-chases and enjoying the adulation of your fans.

As the game opens up, however, it quickly becomes apparent that Insomniac doesn't really know how to fill-out the open world. Many of the game's sidequests devolve into simplistic icon chasing, collecting backpacks, chasing pigeons, playing hide-and-seek minigames with Black Cat. Even the more action-packed optional stuff, the small-scale crimes and larger, more challenging base fights where you fend off waves of enemies, do little to elaborate upon their basic premises.

Yet by far *Spider-Man*'s biggest shortcoming is its failure to effectively utilise the comics' wonderful roster of villains. Spider-Man probably has the most memorable collection of foes outside of Batman. But unlike the *Arkham* games, Spider-Man's adversaries barely get a look in until the third act. An early sequence with Shocker demonstrates the potential for open world fun. But even this is contained to the main story, and you don't see many other notable Spidey villains until toward the end of the game.

Instead, most missions involve fighting one of three different factions of armed thugs. This isn't a problem in the early game, but if you thought *Arkham Knight* stretched Rocksteady's combat system to breaking point, *Spider-Man*'s fisticuffs hang by a thread after 25 hours. It's impressive in a way, because the system isn't short of methods to dispatch these hired goons. Yet it still feels completely exhausted by the time you approach the game's final act.

You genuinely feel for Peter as he desperately tries to hold the city together

In short, *Spider-Man*'s open world design is a missed opportunity. But this isn't necessarily a deal-breaker. Simply being Spider-Man is an awful lot of fun, and while Insomniac's attempt at open world design is lacking, the studio's approach to storytelling is excellent.

NOSEY PARKER

Indeed, Insomniac does a better job of telling a Spider-Man story than anything in the MCU, using the additional scope offered by a videogame to add some proper depth to both Spidey and the secondary cast. The decision to go with a slightly older Peter Parker is a smart one, and not simply because it means the game isn't another origin story. It lets Insomniac explore already-matured relationships between these well-known characters.

The existing history between Peter and Mary Jane, for example, makes for a far more interesting relationship than yet another will-they won't-they teen romance. It also leads to some wonderful scenes, like their first post-breakup rendezvous in a New York cafeteria

(which includes a lovely Stan Lee cameo). But the highlight of the game's character drama is the relationship between Peter and Otto Octavius. The game spends a lot of time establishing not only their friendship, but their mutual intellectual respect. This makes Otto's slow descent into villainy all the more tragic and effective, even though we know from the start where his character will ultimately go.

This isn't to say that Insomniac's *Spider-Man* is a po-faced affair. Spidey is as quippy as ever during fights, and the script is laced with fun jokes, such as an amusing running Spider-cop gag. (As an aside, *Spider-Man*'s portrayal of the NYPD is very favourable, which can be jarring given the seemingly endless controversies involving US police forces, and the broader debate about law enforcement practices.) But the writing is equally capable in the quieter and more serious moments. You genuinely feel for Peter as he desperately tries to hold the city together while his own life falls apart, and although the game doesn't do enough with Spidey's enemy roster, the two villains it focuses on most are both superbly portrayed antagonists.

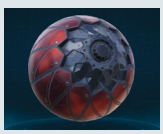
The story is not without its flaws though. The second act is too drawn out, and the third too short. The playable Mary Jane sequences help lend the character greater agency, but *Spider-Man* isn't a great stealth game even when you're Spidey. As Mary Jane, they become cramped, insta-fail stealth puzzles with poor signposting, and are easily the most frustrating sections in the game.

But even when this game is at its most irritating, there is still something irresistibly likeable about it. *Marvel's Spider-Man Remastered* may not be as well-rounded an experience as Rocksteady's *Arkham* games, certainly *City* and possibly *Knight* too. But when you're swinging through Time Square in glorious sunshine as New York's citizenry gazes agog at you from below... well, it's a superhero high that even the caped crusader would struggle to beat. ■

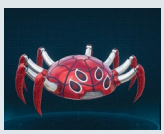
GADGET MAN

Spidey's best equipment

IMPACT-WEB
A powerful web attack that sends enemies flying back, and can entrap them if they hit a surface.



WEB-BOMB
Sticks to a single target and then detonates, entrapping all nearby foes.



SPIDER-DRONE
Flies around zapping enemies with energy blasts. Very useful for interrupting enemy attacks.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Insomniac's *Spider-Man* is as loveable as ever, even if the surrounding game can't quite live up to him.

75

SILENCE, BAND

WE ARE OFK painfully wants to be your next favourite thing

By Ruth Cassidy

We Are OFK's greatest flaws come from its main hook: the game exists to launch OFK as a music project, a 'fictional' biopic to a 'real' virtual band. Compromises are made in the songs that wouldn't be in an OST, for commercial appeal, all while the plot goes out of its way to criticise such compromises. The characters are also a product that the game is trying to sell: for me to like them, to want to support them.

It's mostly an animated series, with minimal interaction, focused on the band's formation in a pastel-heavy LA. Occasional dialogue options share insight into a character's thoughts or feelings, but aren't choices outside of the moment. There'll be two different ways to call someone a jerk, or three different ways to be hyped about boba, but you're firmly streamlined through 'jerk' and 'yay boba'. The story is split into five episodes of about an hour long, planned to release weekly: one episode, one integrated music video, one single.

The trap of OFK being a real band, trying to make relatable bops for all its audience means some songs seem to fit their episode's brief better than others. Fool's Gold, an ode to the human experience of insecurity and imposter syndrome, has no trouble also mapping to a specific character. Footsteps, on the other hand, really wants to lose you in the beat and its more technically involved music video – but tacked on to the end of an episode focused highly around grief and alienation, feels all style and no substance.

Some songs seem to fit their episode's brief better than others

We Are OFK is an extremely character-driven story: it's about what each character wants and needs, and the ways they mesh and conflict with each other. It also means that most of the time is spent watching them talk to each other, or sitting and texting each other. Sexting via coded emojis at a bar, vent texting while bored at work, checking the group chat while on a date. This insight into characters' private spaces – including the way they think about what they say – should make me feel closer to them, but it has the opposite effect.

We Are OFK wants you to feel connected to its characters, and it wants you to like them, which means that anything that lands wrong tends to land hard. In the first episode, lead singer Luca compares a trivial dilemma about songs to Holocaust film Sophie's Choice – something he's only familiar with through cultural osmosis. It's meant to show off that he's hyperbolic and a little vapid, but I found it uncomfortably distasteful.

With my aversion to *We Are OFK*'s attempts to make me connect to its cast, it's not surprising that my favourite episode is one that takes me away from the group, and features comparatively little texting. Episode four is, if not a beach episode, a desert episode, that slows down the pace after some high conflict.

It's almost unplugged, except for some drunk-on-yoghurt texts, and quietly focuses on the grief of a character who has kept themselves intentionally on the sidelines until

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An interactive series about the ups and downs of being 20-something (and in a pop band) in LA

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC at time of writing

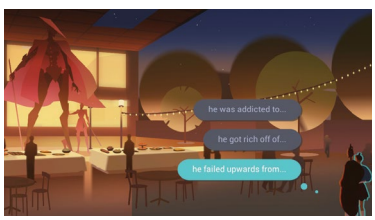
DEVELOPER
Team OFK

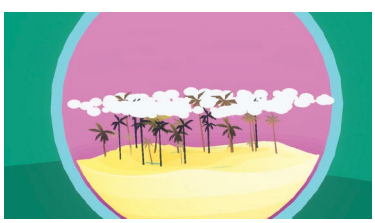
PUBLISHER
In-house

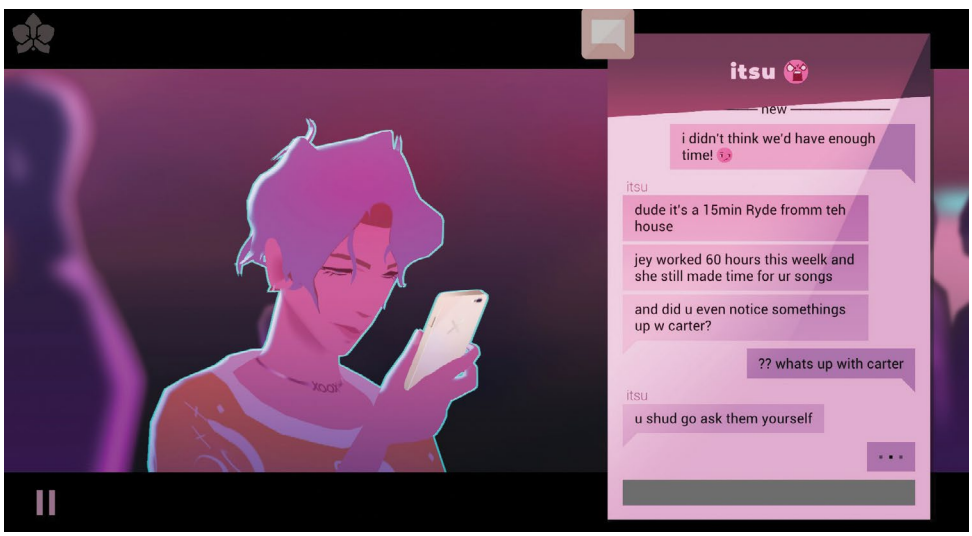
REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel i5-10500H, 16GB, RTX 3060 (Laptop)

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ofk.cool

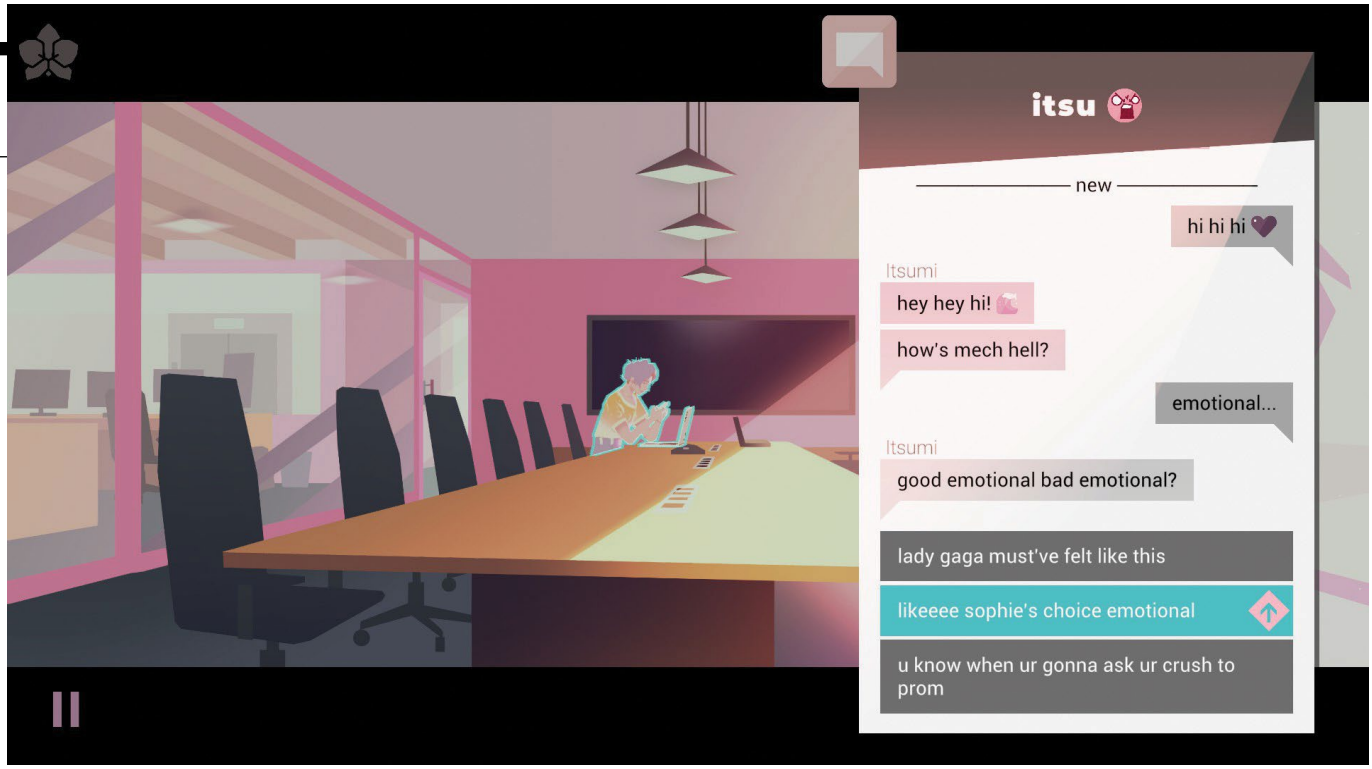


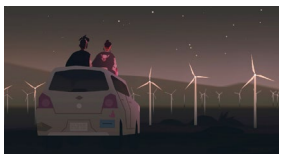


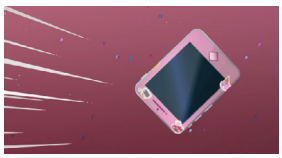


TOP: The leads are desperate to escape their jobs in the game industry.

RIGHT: Get ready to read a lot of texts.







TOP: Again: this bit repeats over multiple episodes.

ABOVE: This road trip heart-to-heart is genuinely touching.

now. The series' themes – about vulnerability, and conflicting needs – are best expressed in the one episode that departs most from format. It's notably the one where the music video feels the least integrated. Best episode, worst promotion of OFK.

VIRTUAL INSANITY

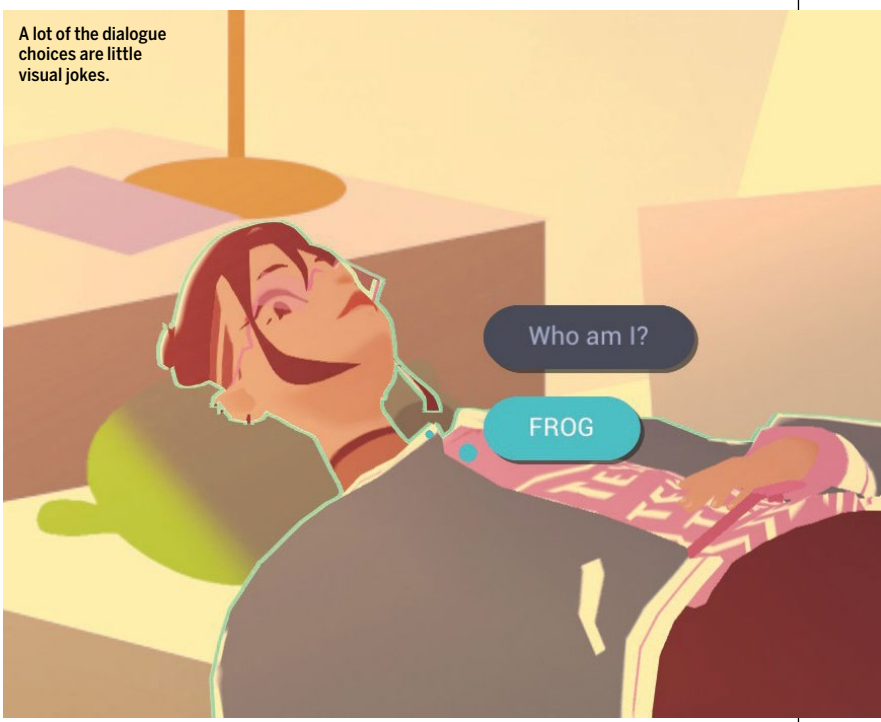
There is something simultaneously too real and too fake about *We Are OFK* that always makes it feel like you're being sold something. Luca talks about wanting to make meaningful art that helps people, and is repeatedly reassured that he is, and it's hard to square that with the catchy but nothing-y dance pop the band are producing in-universe.

The novelty here is in the hook: it's not just a game, it's a fictional biopic for a 'real' virtual band, who stream three times a week on Twitch, and hope to go on tour. If you put the novelty aside, there are more interesting stories about 20-somethings finding themselves; there's interactive fiction that uses text in more engaging ways; and games that aren't compromised by trying to sell you a relationship with their product. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An uncomfortable blend of pitching you vulnerability, a new friend group, and brand consumption.

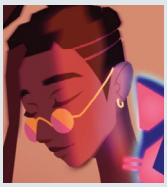
55



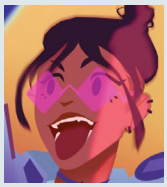
A lot of the dialogue choices are little visual jokes.

WHO ARE OFK?

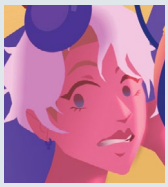
Meet the (virtual) band



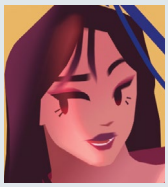
CARTER
Audiovisual effects artist. A soft-spoken science fiction fan who may be able to invent sentient (feline) life.



ITSUMI
Keyboards. Texts a lot of frog stickers and keyboard smashes, and likes anime and getting messy drunk.



LUCA
Lead vocals. Overall space case, and passionate as he is distractable. His dating life is predictably terrible.



JEY
Producer. Seems like the most put together of all of them, but is possibly just under the most pressure.

SCHOOL'S A JOKE

TWO POINT CAMPUS offers a great education in zaniness

By Fraser Brown

"University gives you a bright future... and clouds it with debt." Of all the gags *Two Point Campus* fires off over the university PA system, this one has stuck with me the most, capturing the experience of playing this management sequel as well as enrolling in further education. I had high hopes for my students, but by the end I only cared about how much cash I could bleed from them to keep the university in the black.

Running a campus is expensive. The buildings and staff chip away at my bank balance regularly, and whenever I have a nice fat stack sitting in the vault, I know that all it's going to take to burn through it is a request for a new supercomputer. Why can't they just be happy with all the live owls I added to the dormitories? Owls are a hoot.

You can't do anything without plenty of cash, but the acquisition of wealth is not the ultimate goal of *Two Point Campus*. Each of the 12 missions has bespoke main objectives and then plenty of dynamic ones, but at their heart the goal is to create an efficient temple to academia that shits out happy, A+ students across a range of courses, from gastronomy to espionage.

The goal is to create an efficient temple to academia

This is a doddle, at least initially. The first few missions saw me open a science school, chef school, and knight school (not a typo) none of which posed much difficulty. Compared to *Two Point Hospital*, which is by no means a brutal management romp, but is nonetheless purposefully chaotic and tangled, it seemed pretty sedate. But then I took over a struggling wizardry school and started to buckle under the weight of magical curses and incredibly depressed students.

ADMIN 101

It started off simple enough. It already contained some dorms and other essential rooms, leaving me to add bathroom facilities and a few classrooms. Before long my arcane academics were bouncing from lecture to potion class to private tutorials, netting themselves a world-class education in poisoning people with weird elixirs. Sure, sometimes a witch would transform a few students into pumpkin-headed weirdos or bombard the campus with tiny meteors, but the impact seemed negligible. Until it didn't.

Near the end of the first term, the curses had piled up to the point where a significant portion of my students were on the fast track to failure. And those who weren't failing were so depressed they were considering leaving. Failed students and drop-outs do not contribute tutorial fees or spend their student loans at the snack machines, and that was a problem. It wasn't until I was on the cusp of completely losing control over my campus where things just clicked and it started to feel like a proper successor to *Two Point Hospital*.

I took out a loan and invested in more assistants with medical skills to undo the pumpkin head curse, who also needed more facilities to carry out their important work. Then I

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The sequel to *Two Point Hospital*, set in a series of bizarre universities

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Two Point Studios

PUBLISHER
Sega

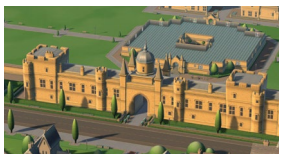
REVIEWED ON
RTX 3080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
twopointcampus.com

TOP: That armour is going to get very rusty.

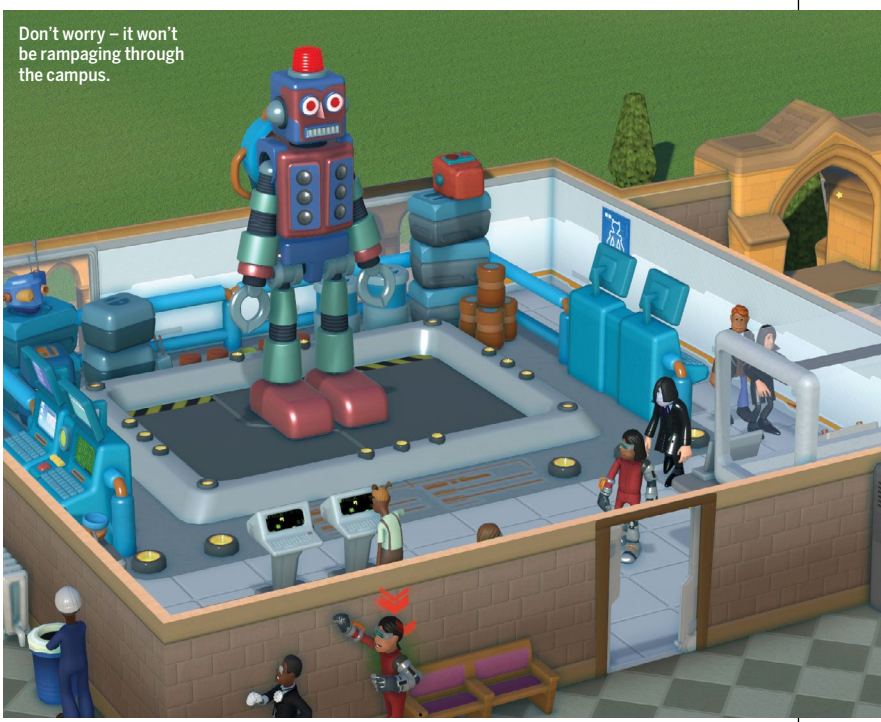
Give the band a big hand.



gussied up the dorms so my students would have cosy sanctuaries where they could unwind after a hard day of spell-slinging. I started grabbing rooms and moving them around to minimise the time it took students to reach their classes and maximise the space. And I founded a power-napping club to help low-energy students get more pep in their step. Amid the crisis, I came alive, squashing and averting disaster after disaster. I bought a lot of owls.

Generally, though, *Two Point Campus* gives you management wrinkles that are easier to handle. Keeping on top of schedules and queues, which was the bread and butter of a *Two Point Hospital* administrator, is a minor concern here. If you've let too many students get sick without treatment, you should expect some queues outside the new medical room, and if you've got a bunch of starving kids hanging around, they're all going to rush towards any vending machine you plop down; but this is nothing compared to the hospital patients spending days stuck in waiting rooms or queuing outside doctors' offices, potentially even dying before they even get seen.

Things absolutely do get trickier if you're trying to get more stars, however. Each mission has three to earn, and three sets of challenges associated with them, but you only need a single star in each to progress.



Don't worry – it won't be rampaging through the campus.

TOP: The bigger the cauldron the greater the pong.

ABOVE: Gary Lineker is my interior decorator.

TOP OF THE CLASS

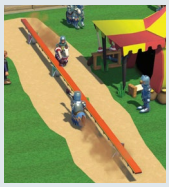
Two Point Campus' *best classes*

ARCHAEOLOGY
Students get to go to actual digs (on your campus) and unearth ancient artefacts that you can sell off or display.

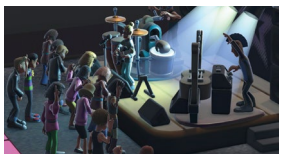
ROBOTICS
One of the first classes you'll encounter, and the only one that lets students build giant robots.

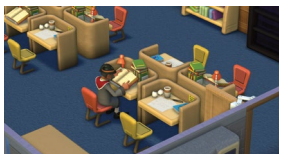
SPY SCHOOL
Jetpacks, alligator pits, out-of-control drones – spies get all the best toys. Just watch out for the mole infestation.

GASTRONOMY
I find cooking to be incredibly stressful, but the giant cakes, pizzas, and burgers might make me a total convert.



KNIGHT SCHOOL
I always enjoy an excellent but obvious pun, but I like watching knights jousting with fake horses even more.





TOP: I don't know the rules of cheeseball, but it's now my favourite sport.

LEFT: Spies are masters of subtlety.

By the time you're aiming for the other stars, you might be running out of space, or trying to juggle a lot of different courses and too many staff. But completionists will also unlock more items to help create a content campus, as well as getting more opportunities to earn kudosh, a secondary currency that can be spent on unlocking new decorations and classroom tools.

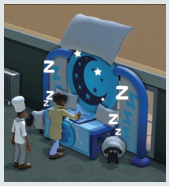
FIGHTING THE SYSTEM

Less helpful is the UI. I encountered a few situations where I had to do things like raise the attractiveness of the campus while being given inaccurate information. At one point I had a main objective to beautify the place and a random secondary objective to do the same, but the number on the trackers didn't match. And when I went into the proper menu, I got a third number. The difference was just a few percent, and this isn't the kind of management game where a lack of precision is fatal, but you do expect to trust what the game is telling you.

Where *Two Point Campus* gets top marks is the novelty of its challenges. Ultimately there's not much difference between educating chefs and spies because, no matter what the course, they'll still need tutors, lecture theatres, and places to complete assignments, like libraries and computer labs. This is quite convenient because one of the

KING OF CLUBS

Time to get extra-curricular

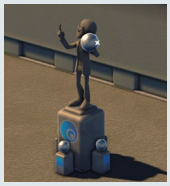


POWER-NAP CLUB
Students can get tired, but not members of the Power-Nap Club, who can have a doze and become energised.

BOOK CLUB
Students can learn faster via this ancient technique known as 'reading'. It;s what you're doing right now! Feel smarter?

SPEED WALKING CLUB
Help your students get around your labyrinthine campus with greater haste with this club.

NATURE CLUB
Nature is so very sexy, so Nature Club members naturally make your campus more seem a lot attractive.



ORB CLUB
Alleviate your guilt over letting students get brainwashed by a cult by enjoying all the cash the cult gives you.

schools you'll run is a spy school masquerading as a culinary college. But each mission also comes with some unique quirks.

The spy school, for instance, is constantly being infiltrated by moles, who have to be rooted out and expelled. This is a simple process where you have to react to a bunch of students being befuddled – evidence of a mole in the vicinity – and then hunt down the mole by watching the group's behaviour. If anyone brings out a camera or puts their finger to their ear, then you give them the boot. If this was present in every mission it would soon outstay its welcome, but by giving each a new, eccentric wrinkle Two Point Studios keeps them from getting stale.

I dig archaeology the most because your students actually get to work in the field and uncover artefacts. With limited funding, you're encouraged to sell these artefacts, but since many of them are aesthetically pleasing, you can also use them to improve the attractiveness of your campus. The artefacts grow in value with age, however, so you might want to wait before you sell them, unless your students have uncovered an old can or some other rubbish, which nobody wants to look at.

One of the biggest obstacles in *Two Point Hospital* was the immutability of the buildings. You could expand by purchasing more land, but you couldn't edit the buildings themselves, only their interiors. *Two Point Campus* has done away with this limitation entirely, letting you edit and construct new buildings, as well as giving them some cosmetic flourishes, taking full advantage of the available space. You'll still have limited plots of land, however, so the spatial puzzles persist, but with fewer frustrations.

Each mission also comes with some unique quirks

COLLEGE CAPERS

There is, of course, so much more to *Two Point Campus* than the conundrums it provides. A bit of pressure is imperative, but equally as important is the silliness. Radio plays, adverts, and announcements are constantly blaring out of the PAs, spitting out jokes, ridiculous anecdotes, and the odd bit of satire – little of it is very biting, but all of it's good fun. And of course there are the visual gags and whimsical courses. Students cooking gargantuan pizzas, flying around on jetpacks, making massive robots – there's just so much to stare at.

With the rise of survival management sims, the genre has grown more demanding, so I appreciate being able to just enjoy some slapstick instead of being informed that 20 people have died from malnutrition. Here everyone gets out alive. Though not necessarily with a degree.

I do think that Two Point Studios missed a trick by not giving the students much individuality or personality, though. There are goths, jocks, cyborgs, and wannabe superstars, but their needs are mostly generic. They want nice dorms, friends, maybe a bit of romance, and increasingly expensive equipment to help them with their assignments. These things rarely relate to who they are, as evidenced by the goths who ask me to plant flower beds and benches so they can enjoy the outdoors.

That's not to say there are no personality traits, but they're all things like being unhygienic or not liking homework, which simply make them worse students rather than actually more interesting ones. I can't remember any of them because they're all just a bunch of randos. To be fair, this might be exactly how real university administrators feel.

Two Point Campus doesn't rock the boat, fitting firmly into the mould of its predecessor – but replicating one of the best management games of recent years is a smart strategy. Surprises are few, and I hope the UI flaws are fixed promptly, but this is still a good time, bursting with energy and zany shenanigans. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

***Two Point Campus*, developed by Two Point Studios, is a university that I would be proud to call my alma mater.**

80

ABOVE: I think there will be enough to share.

RIGHT: Movie night > lectures.

THUMBS UP, GLADI-SKATER

With slow-mo action and skating, ROLLERDROME's the sport of the century

By Samantha Greer

Rollerdrome is a game about performance. There is combat, but it's not about winning, as such. It's about style. The attitude you bring to it. Efficiency is a byproduct of mastering its violent dance – really, you're here to look good. It might be my favourite action game since *Devil Daggers*. A single-minded, stylish, and evocative beast that pulls you along for a ride it's hard to let go of. Let's just say I've had more than one after midnight session of *Rollerdrome*, chasing those high scores.

The main character, Kara Hassan, finds herself thrown into a gladiatorial contest... with roller skates. Think Running Man on wheels and you're there. In essence the game is pretty simple: you skate and shoot. The joy of it is that while it builds so much upon that foundation, it's still great fun even if you only ever learn the basics. Coming from Roll7, the folks behind the joyous skateboarding series *OlliOlli*, that's no surprise. Skating is simple – you simply steer and build momentum – but it feels great. There's a real sense of speed that adds to all your actions, however many you master.

Think Running Man on wheels and you're basically there

NO PAYNE, NO GAIN

With *Max Payne*-esque bullet time, landing shots is a matter of timing more than aim, which makes combat feel part of the game's overall rhythm instead of an interruption to your flips and tricks. You can get health by killing enemies, but only get ammo back from doing tricks like grinds or perfect dodges. There always has to be a balance between movement and attack. Nailing that combo is the sweet spot where *Rollerdrome* becomes electrifying, pushing you to go faster and faster. What weapon combinations let you take down a shielded foe in seconds? Can you trick that enemy into launching mines at their allies? I expect to see social media flooded with clips of people's best runs. It's a game that's almost as fun to watch as it is to play.

The visuals certainly don't hurt on that front. It has a sketchy, vibrant look reminiscent of last year's *Sable* with retro future, '70s-inspired design. All of it clearly owing influence to the work of artist Jean Giraud, better known as Moebius. (No, not the double box office bomb vampire.) It's striking in screenshots or in motion, but moreover, highly readable. Strong colours, high contrasts. Even the big bold text that introduces new levels speaks to the clarity they're aiming for.

The game can afford to get incredibly chaotic and explosive (especially in its later stages) because it so clearly communicates information to the player. Sniper beams or charging lasers turn white to indicate the perfect dodge, for instance. Even the sounds are great, that harsh roll of wheels on concrete pulling you in before the symphony of explosions, rockets, and shotgun blasts is unleashed. The soundtrack itself seems to mimic the increasing tempo of each level, letting you know when the timer has kicked in. All this combines to ensure you know what's going on in any given moment without ever really having to think about it. It just happens to look and sound damn good doing it.

RISE AND GRIND

As you progress, complexity increases rapidly. Enemy types pile up, each asking for new tactics from the player (check out challenges for hints) as do player abilities. Skating gets complemented by wall running, and your starting pistols are soon kept company by a shotgun, grenade launcher, and rail gun. Each of these offers a new dimension or play style, letting you tackle enemies with specific combinations until you have a routine that will make even your first runs pretty successful. I loved coming into crazy new spaces with heaps of confidence. In fact, the difficulty curve of the game feels perfectly pitched all the way through. Things definitely get tougher towards the end, but I never

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third person shoot-'em-up on skates

EXPECT TO PAY
TBC at time of writing

DEVELOPER
Roll7

PUBLISHER
Private Division

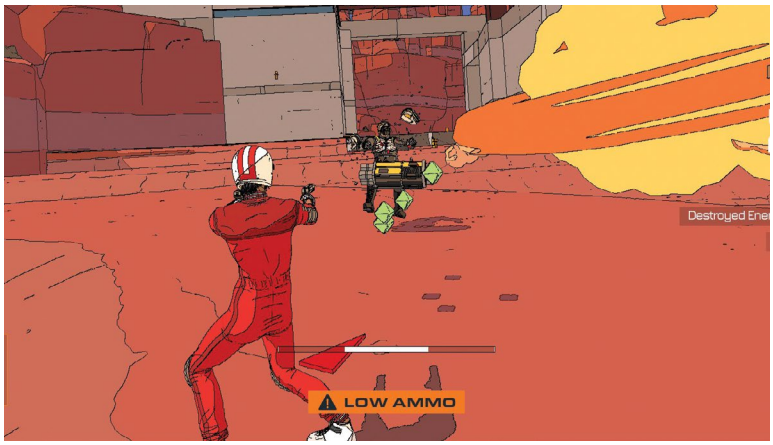
REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 10, Nvidia GeForce GTX-970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

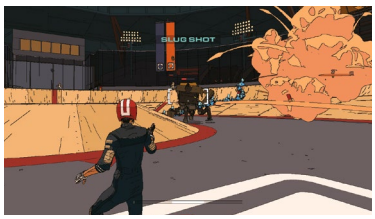
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3Bu0CHC

RAMPING UP

***Over a dozen hours with* Rollerdrome**



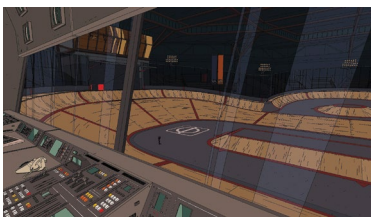


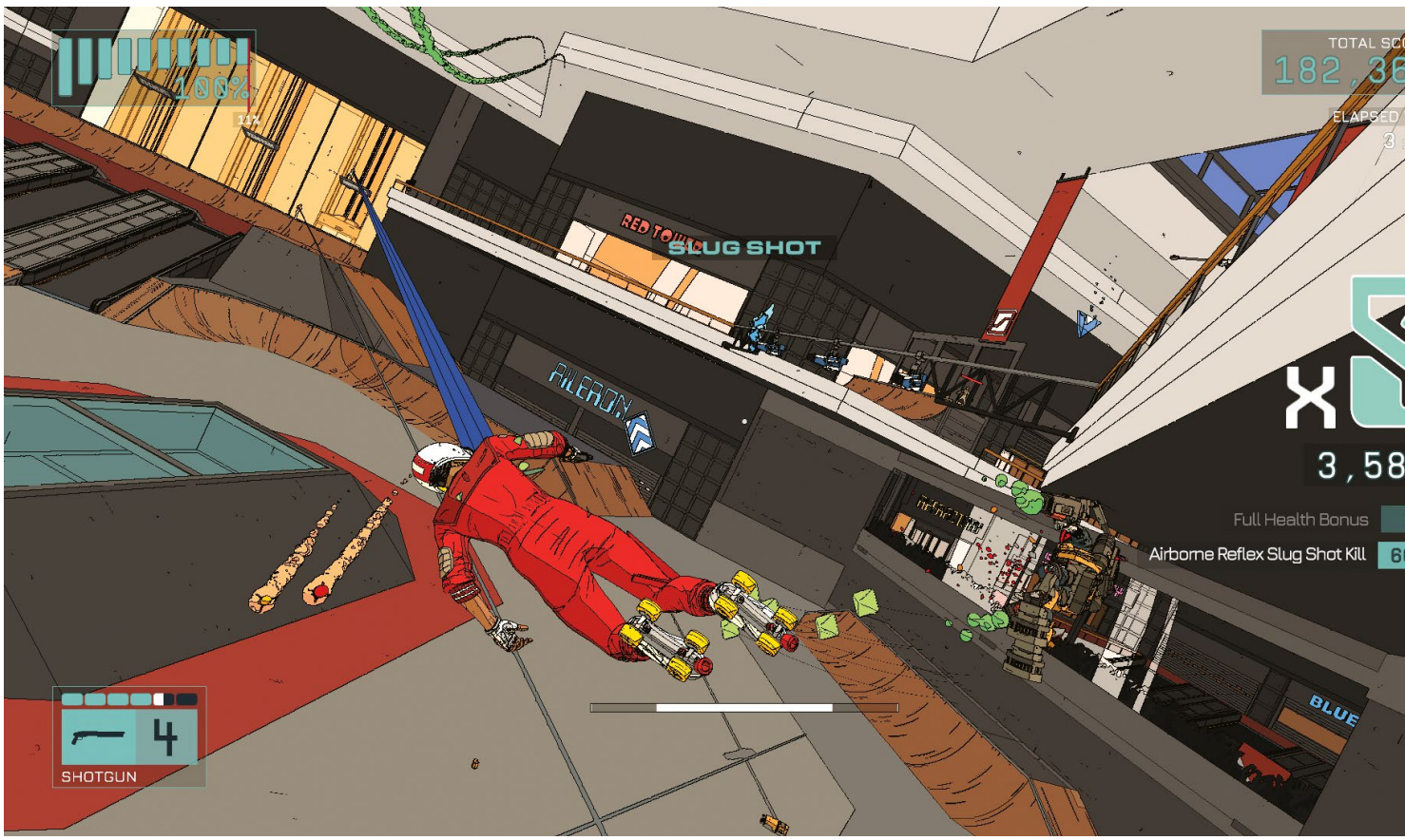
FAR LEFT: It's hard to take screenshots that don't look sick as hell

BELOW: Finally, a way to enjoy being at the mall.

RIGHT: Hard to appreciate when you're in the fight, but it has a lot of detail.

BELOW: Hey Hassan, do a flip!





felt out of my depth. New enemies never felt like setbacks, just exciting new puzzles to solve.

No matter how much it stacks on top, the core of the game is always on performance. It's not about taking out your enemies, it's about doing it with style. Rushing past an enemy so you can spin and shoot him the back looks cool – and the game is quick to acknowledge that. Doing a flip right before launching a grenade down on a walking mech is what gets the audience excited at this ludicrous death-sport. There's a heap of tricks to master too (with a handy 'tricktionary' listing them all) and fitting them into your runs is essential if you want those high scores, or to complete the game's challenges.

Progress through the game's campaign (about a dozen levels, plus an unlockable mode after completion) is tied to those challenges, which encourage players to try out daring moves or chase impossible score multipliers. You don't have to work those into a serious run – even if you hit a challenge before defeat it still counts, so you can just tackle each challenge on its own if you want. Again, if you wanna just take it easy, the game allows that. In fact, there are a host of modifiers to make the game easier, including invincibility, ensuring the experience is as accessible as possible. Using them takes you off the leaderboards, but you get to enjoy the game on your terms.

BE A GOOD SPORT

If you're anything like me though, you'll want those high scores. Chaining some challenges and a high multiplier together? Let's get to work. Having a few practice runs before pulling off some wild feat is a thrill only the best of action games can offer, but I don't know that I've played any such score focused games that left me feeling so... relaxed? I seldom got frustrated over a failure or a messed up stunt. There's a sense that it's all just practice, putting in the work to get it right next time rather than a loss. Which only adds to the joy as you start not only doing well, but throwing in little flourishes. A spin before a shotgun blast here, a somersault before taking out a sniper from above.

This bravado forms part of Kara Hassan's identity too. She's practically a silent protagonist, but there's a sense of who she is through the game's encouragement of stunts, and in its small sprinkling of narrative sections. At the outset of each new tier of the championship, you get a little breather, a small slice of life in the shoes of the champ as she explores behind the scenes spaces to flesh out the world. The way she'll comment on some of her aloof rivals, or play with an action figure, sketches out someone competitive but just humble enough to understand stakes beyond this sport she's in.

If you're anything like me, you'll want those high scores

You will too as you play, finding hints of protests and revolution outside the arena but on some level knowing that... you like this terrible thing. You're good at it. At what point do you go from reluctant combatant to complicit champion in this world? It's a slippery slope... especially when you've got skates on.

All that's a complementary story, applied with a light touch. Just enough to get you to take a breath and wonder about where this is all going. As badly as Kara, I wanted to see the end. Partly because of the sights, with each new level raising the spectacle from stadium battles to all out battlefields. There's a truly spectacular spider tank fight later that slots into the game's over the top sensibilities effortlessly. If you could see what you're up against at the game's end from the beginning, you'd think it impossible, but by the time you get there, the overwhelming odds will just put a smile on your face. Bring it on.

SKATE OUTTA TEN

Keeping on top of the rising chaos is a key survival skill, but you can't keep things too calm or it'll become impossible to chain together those score multipliers. Enemies almost become dance partners, and you have to plan out some careful choreography to reach those high scores rather than just killing everything in sight as quickly as possible. You might hit an enemy once to keep a multiplier going and leave them for the next go around the map instead of killing them. Once you start to think about *Rollerdrome* in those terms, you'll be amazed at the ludicrous heights you can reach.

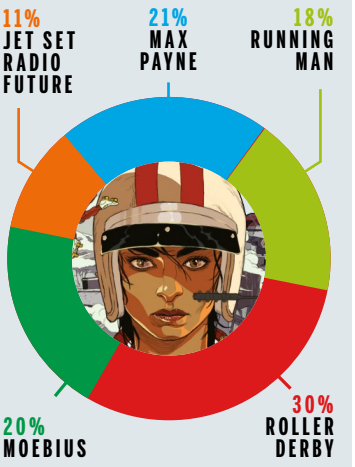
Not that speed isn't important. You get a bonus to your score for how much you beat it under the time limit, and a penalty for any time over. Just don't lose sight of what's important (the scores). The game certainly doesn't.

Because *Rollerdrome* is a game that squints its eyes, takes aim, and lasers in on the bullseye. Its focus is placed squarely on delivering that loop of blisteringly paced action, the kind of thing you can play again and again and again, because each individual beat hits so hard and flows into the next effortlessly.

There are no skill trees, no unlockable abilities or experience points to grind. No obstacles between you and the exhilaration on offer. It's a game that knows exactly what it wants to be and lets nothing get in its way. Kara Hassan certainly isn't gonna stop until she's conquered this sport. After over dozens of hours in the *Rollerdrome*, I'm beginning to think I won't either. ■

HOW TO MAKE A BLOODSPORT

If you put in skates, they will come



PC GAMER VERDICT

Rollerdrome **is an absolute action showstopper. And it has to be one of the best to ever do it.**

94

PAIN CONDUCTOR

SYMPHONY OF WAR: THE NEPHILIM SAGA reimagines the strategy JRPG

By Jonathan Bolding

There's a simple delight to JRPG character customisation. Extend that to an entire squad of characters on a tactical grid? Now you've got your classic strategy JRPG. Extend it to an entire army of several dozen squads? That's the rework you get in *Symphony of War: The Nephilim Saga*. Setting out a buffet of customisation around your army is enough to shake up a genre that was becoming one-note – even if the generic story does it no favours.

Symphony of War's spin on the strategy JRPG is all about the squad. Each squad is made up of as many as nine units, each placed into a formation that you create on 15 squares – and the boundaries between them – for about 15 distinct positions. Whereas other games emphasise single individuals, only the most powerful heroes can take on an enemy squad single-handed in *Symphony*. Instead of customising the precise stats of individual people, you decide the squad built around them, tweaking composition and class as you go, and pushing their leadership stat ever-higher to increase their max squad size. Equipment also goes to the squad, with powerful artefacts taking up both equipment slots and space that could be used for soldiers.

But despite all that complexity, it's surprisingly easy to grasp. There's a decent in-game reference manual, and while some in-depth mechanics and the precise effect of stats – or how some terrain works – aren't very clear, it never feels like you're held back by a lack of understanding.

SQUAD GOALS

All that core gameplay serves to make your army and its journey the focus of your attention. In building your squads and shaping a strategy for your army, *Symphony of War* feels like a genuinely new angle on the genre, with the only comparable games being the *Ogre Battle* series – all now well over 20 years old.

Recruiting promising rookies and mercenaries off the market, fitting them into a squad, fiddling with their stats as they level up, and pushing them further up the large tree of connected classes is a satisfying core loop, with plenty of strategy knobs to tweak and levers to pull. It's also structured in a way that encourages you to explore, letting you freely drop characters back a class tier to try something new without any penalty.

Despite all of the complexity, it's still surprisingly easy to grasp

Take Stefan, the roguish hero. He's a natural leader for a light infantry squad, but could also lend his ambush expertise to a squad of light cavalry. Barnabas is a pretty good tank, but he's also got traits that make his squadmates get better at leadership themselves: his squad is a perfect incubator to make promising candidates into future squad leaders.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A novel strategy JRPG set in a pretty standard fantasy world

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Dancing Dragon Games

PUBLISHER
Freedom Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Radeon RX 6800 XT, 32GB RAM, AMD Ryzen 9 5900

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3SI9Tb6

PUT IT ON DECK

This one was born for the Steam Deck

1 CONTROLS Binding Q and E to the shoulder buttons let me cycle units quickly, while holding down the left trigger speeds up animations.

2 PERFORMANCE *Symphony*'s pixel art and inspirations in *Fire Emblem* and *Advance Wars* make it an obvious and superb game for the Steam Deck.

3 BATTERY By cutting down FPS, brightness and more, I was able to push towards a nearly seven-hour battery life playing *Symphony of War*.

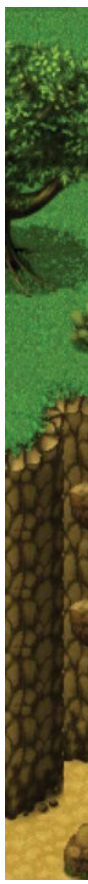
Some leaders are more specialised: General Lysander gets a discount on the space gunpowder units take up in his squad. He's a great leader for dragoon cavalry or a pike-and-shot tercio. These are leadership traits that exist not just in your pre-made heroes, but in unique named mercenaries that pop up in shops between missions, and even sometimes from skill-giving tomes dropped out in the world.

All that customisation is constrained by the gold you earn in missions and arena battles, which has to be spent on the market to get new units and artefacts. Increasingly specialised units also need increasingly specialised resources, which you have to buy from markets and retrieve from mines and villages during missions: gemstones to make mages, horses for cavalry, iron for infantry, and rarer resources – sunstones, obsidian – the further up the class tree you get.

GENERIC FANTASYLANDS

There's not a dearth of world to explore, either. There are 30 core missions, a handful of sidequests, an arena system to fight in for rewards, and a forthcoming endless training mode. There's an over-the-top story tied to it all, too, your classic semi-apocalyptic end of the world and attendant divinely-chosen saviour stuff. Your main heroes talk and form familial or romantic bonds between missions, showing off a bit of personality, though that feature is very anaemic compared to other games. Don't expect a fully-fledged dating sim like modern *Fire Emblem* here, just a tree of conversations to click through at your leisure.

The story is nothing too complex or adult, but not so bad that it distracts from the fun of actually playing. This is, to be pointed, not a genre that many players come to for fine characterisation and poignant storytelling, and for all the mechanical innovation you won't find

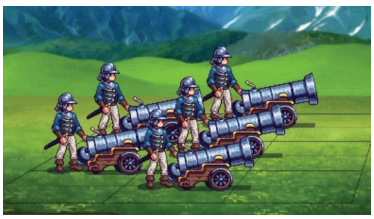


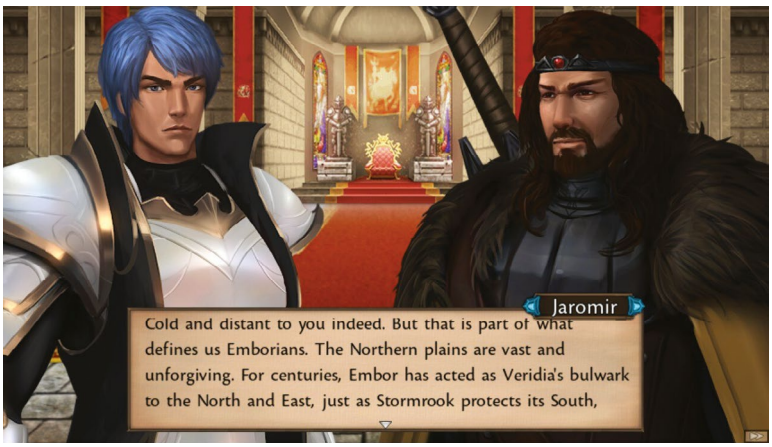
LEFT: Artefacts that increase squad size are very powerful.

BELOW: "Please, Azuros was my father. Call me Mr Blue."

FAR RIGHT: On the right you'll see dollar store Ned Stark.

BELOW: With 20 squads on the field your battles feel pretty epic.





it here either. The loop is to manage the army, read some story, fight, read a bit more, then back to your army.

That's not always perfectly executed. Sometimes the story steps in, taking away units for a few missions or limiting which forces you can bring to bear – which is done well here, but is a pet peeve for many. There's also a notable failure to blend story and mechanics in a few parts by employing similar strategy game tropes. Stuff like employing boring objectives during a forced loss mission, or making you play out extremely one-sided missions where you can't actually lose.

It's all carried off in bright pixel art in battles, and more muted static character portraits during dialogue. The pixel art is actually especially nice, and really packs a lot of character and energy into pretty small spaces. Over it all is a cheery soundtrack, and though it's a bit thin, the tracks it does have are quite good – they capture the mood well.

TACTICAL ATTRACTION

What you're here for is the tactics, and that is where *Symphony of War: The Nephilim Saga* shines. Having built an army from what you can and can't afford, using what commanders you have, you now have to take it into the field. Each mission has a squad deployment limit, generally ranging from five to the late-game total of twenty. On the field you've got objectives to capture, challenges to attempt, and resources to pillage from mines. Sticking to a tight turn limit, eliminating key enemies, and completing those bonus objectives lets you raise your faction rank.

This is on the face of it really simple grid-based combat. One square vertical or horizontal is one move, no diagonals, and each squad moves in a way determined by its majority composition. A squad of light infantry can ignore terrain penalties and attack from cover for an ambush bonus, while cavalry can inflict morale-shattering Shock with a charge in open terrain, and while heavy infantry have neither benefit, they do give bonus defence to units behind them on the layout grid...

Oh, sorry, we're talking about squad building again, aren't we? It can't be helped. These two parts of *Symphony* are so thoroughly and delightfully linked.

When your squad attacks an enemy's on the battlefield map, we jump to close-up combat for two alternating rounds of attacks: Attacker first, then defender. Attacks like ambushes deprive your enemy of their first round of attacks. The attacks of most mages take time to charge up, so they don't do anything on the first round but lay out a powerful blast on the second. Gunpowder units fire on the first round, but can't fire again on the second. In short, it's an autobattle where your melee units attack the enemy in front of them on the grid and ranged units pick a target of opportunity while specialist units like healers, dragons, and mages do their thing in turn.

Between missions you do all the squad building and management

BATTLEFIELDS OF NOTE

Broader tactical choices play into the fights, mostly revolving around terrain, unit type, and morale. You might strike from a hill to increase your range, keep to the woods to provide cover from archers, or stick in the open to avoid ambushes from enemy light squads. I was a big fan of using tough units of knights out in the open, just two spaces away from a forest or hill, then catching foes in an ambush by a light squad attacking from the woods. I had to watch the morale of those knights, of course, because a surrounded unit's low morale causes it to take more damage, while high morale can sometimes give units bonus attacks.

There are, beyond basic fights, specific tactical choices you can gain access to: styles of attack like aggression to deal more damage but take more, or targeting the enemy leader to damage their morale. They're all interesting choices, the bread and butter of strategy games, but the most interesting of these opens up a few missions in, and enables you to attempt to force the enemy to surrender.

Enemies with low morale, while outmatched, can be given this option. If they take it they're wiped off the field regardless of HP, and you get bonus faction rank and gold after the mission. If they don't take it you're caught out, they attack first, and you lose a round of combat. It's a superb bit of not just mechanical, but storytelling flavour: you're the good guys, you fight mercifully and you're rewarded mechanically for that.

Between missions you do all the squad building and management, but you also build up your army in other ways. Faction experience stars let you unlock new technologies, which can be as banal as increasing morale damage for killing the enemy leader and as revolutionary as allowing gunpowder units to fire twice in one combat, or unlocking new units like dragon riders. If you're like me you'll easily spend as much time tweaking, planning and optimising your army as actually fighting with it.

Which is superb. The heart of this genre is enjoying the interactions between mechanics, customising your characters and tweaking their equipment. It doesn't matter if the story's not the best when I thought, halfway through the game, that I'd explore some set of build options next time through. I hadn't finished and I already knew I'd play it again. ■

STAR SQUAD STATISTICS

How to become stronger

1 CLASS
Base classes of fighter, bowman, medic, and militia grow into different types of units. Fighters for example become good melee warriors and cavalry.

2 AFFINITY
Affinities are key to maximising units, and give bonuses to stat growth from level up – a fire-type warrior will be better at dealing damage.

3 STATS
Weapon is base damage, modified by strength. Armour is straight-up damage resistance. Strength adds to attack and magic does the same for spells.

4 TRAITS
These are special powers of this specific soldier. Some come from class, like guardian for heavy infantry tanks. Others are innate and offer rare bonuses.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Novel tactical mechanics make *Symphony of War: The Nephilim Saga* a contender for the best strategy RPG this year.

81

HOPPY DAYS

Trade with frogs, and almost become one yourself in TIME ON FROG ISLAND

By Christopher Livingston

I'm not a frog, I've recently become pleasingly frog-like. I can croak like a frog, I can perform a froggish sproing-jump, and I can even thwip my tongue out of my mouth and grab items with it, or use it as a grappling hook to pull myself up cliffs and swing myself from ledge to ledge. As a tiny human sea captain in adventure game *Time on Frog Island*, I've spent so much time here I've actually become an honorary amphibian.

The original name of *Time on Frog Island* was *Trading Time* and that still fits the game like a glove. Shipwrecked on a colourful island that's home to a society of bipedal frogs, I've been frantically running around trying to trade things with them. To fix my busted ship I need stuff, and they won't give me that stuff until I bring them the stuff they want first. And while it initially feels like just a collection of simple fetch quests – bring a frog a feather and it'll give me some rope – the charming inhabitants and the slowly revealed secrets of the island made me think maybe I should forget about my broken boat and just live here forever and ever.

HOP TO IT

The frogs of Frog Island have occupations – painter, fisherman (fisherfrog?), bartender, handyman, bishop, and plenty more – but they don't speak. They communicate in word bubbles that contain pictures of items, leaving me to scurry around trying to find what they want. That can be tricky when they ask for something I've never seen on the island before, or that I can't identify.

The island is also much bigger than it initially appears

A small but enjoyable complication is that I can only carry one item at a time, and since I'm such a tiny little sea captain I have to hoist each object above my head to carry it. It's a funny sight to see myself hustling at top speed across the island, with a block of ice or a wriggling crab held above my head with two hands, and even after hours of scampering it never stopped being fun to watch.

The island is also much bigger than it initially appears, and even after dashing back and forth across it a dozen times carrying flowers, driftwood, gems, bones, tools, eggs, and other items, I kept stumbling across entirely new regions: snow-covered mountains, sprawling beaches, and an area unreachable until you help a frog build a bridge. It's exciting to discover a new area to explore, especially when those zones have new items to find a use for.

A few items give me a speed boost while I'm carrying them, like a beehive (which presumably makes my sea captain run faster out of fear of being stung) and a plant that deflates like a balloon, rocketing me along for a few seconds. There's a purpose for these power-ups: challenging unlisted quests that have nothing to do with my ship. Those froggy attributes I mentioned earlier, and spots on the island where you can grow mushrooms into bounce pads, become key to speedy travel as well. The sidequests aren't labelled or explained, which made me feel like I was absorbing information about the world and piecing it together, bit by bit, rather than being told exactly what to do.

Time on Frog Island isn't a game to rush through, especially since waiting a day (or fast-forwarding time by resting near a campfire) is sometimes required for certain tasks. There's also a bit of sea captain backstory to be uncovered, which is only revealed if you choose to sleep at the handful of campsites. The captain's story is told in static images, one each night, but explains how you got to the island and why the potted plant you brought with you is so gosh darn important you automatically hug it when you pick it up. And don't worry – once you fix your ship and sail away, you can still keep playing after a short cutscene and the credits roll.

The art, the charm, the little secrets, the creative activities, and the peaceful nature of the game makes me wish there were five times as many frogs to trade with. Even so, my short holiday with *Time on Frog Island* was time well spent. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An adventure game about trading with cute frogs

EXPECT TO PAY
£15.50

DEVELOPER
Half Past Yellow

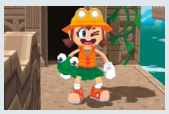
PUBLISHER
Merge Games

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

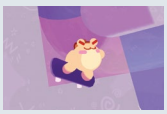
MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3QbTAv9

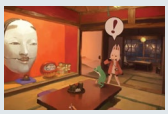
THE TOAD AHEAD *Weirdly, there are lots of indie frog games on the way*



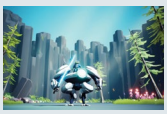
FROGUN
In this platformer, your frog is more than just your best friend – it's your grappling gun.



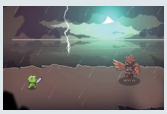
OLLIEFROG TOAD SKATER
Create a custom frog and get grinding, flipping, and spinning in a skatepark.



FOX AND FROG TRAVELERS
An action adventure featuring a frog and another animal that's not a frog.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS
A sword-wielding robot teams up with a gun-slinging frog in this sci-fi roguelike.

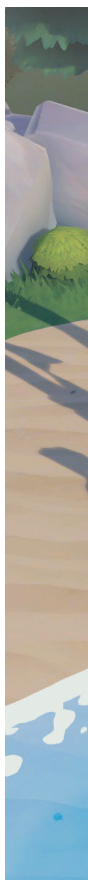


A FROG'S TALE
A turn-based RPG starring a frog with a musical twist: there's a rhythm-based combat system.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Time on Frog Island is a peaceful and utterly charming adventure that left me wishing for a lot more of it.

83



A frog tourist can point you to new areas to explore.

FAR LEFT: This frog's got talent.

LEFT: Frogs only speak in pictures.

BELOW: Shipwrecked, and the only solution is making frogs happy.

DEBUG MODE

STARSHIP TROOPERS: TERRAN COMMAND gets both the strategy and the satire right

By Rick Lane

It's all going bad on the planet of Kwalasha. I've just sent dozens of the Federation's finest to their deaths to restart the planet's mining operation, only to discover that the miners have drilled into an Arachnid nest. This needs a counter-response, but the mines are no longer Command's priority. Instead, they redirect my unit to a prison, where they want my forces to hold back a bug assault long enough to see through the execution of a dissident, which is being broadcast live.

My soldiers man the defences to prepare for the bug assault, but there's barely enough room on the walls for my soldiers to raise their weapons, hindering their ability to shoot. This makes them sitting ducks for the hulking tanker bugs, whose incendiary spit eats through my ranks before my rocket troopers can pulverise them into bug soup. In the end, we manage to hold off the attack, but only at the cost of dozens more soldiers, all so the Federation can watch a man fry on interstellar pay-per-view.

BUGGING OUT

Starship Troopers: Terran Command calls itself a strategy game, but really it's an anti-strategy game. You spend most of its 19-mission campaign dealing with the fallout of Federation High Command's terrible strategic decisions, cobbling together ragtag offences and frantic defences in scenarios that typically end either in narrowly averted disaster, or outright catastrophe. By focussing on the substance of Paul Verhoeven's sci-fi classic rather than the style (and it is the film this game is based on, not the novel) developer The Aristocrats has created a clever and quietly innovative RTS that's thrilling and mechanically satisfying, while remaining true to the film's lampoon of fascist imperialism.

Calls itself a strategy game, but really it's an anti-strategy game

Terran Command kicks off with a tutorial level set in the Battle of Klendathu, where your forces dash through plasma bug fire to assault the Arachnids' defensive lines, before being swiftly repelled and then abandoned by the dropships that come to rescue them. Following this farce, the action switches to Kwalasha, a desert planet rich in natural resources vital to the Federation's war effort.

Kwalasha is where the rest of *Terran Command* takes place, which is arguably the game's biggest flaw. Nearly every level is a vast expanse of brown rock, except for those that take place in grey cities or greyer sewers. Coupled with the Federation's generic sci-fi military aesthetic, and the over-familiar designs of the arachnids, this has the effect of making *Terran Command* about as visually exciting as a bowl of dog food. Indeed, if you went on screenshots alone, you'd be forgiven for thinking *Terran Command* was the most derivative RTS ever made.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A thoughtfully designed strategy game based on Paul Verhoeven's 1997 film

EXPECT TO PAY
£23.80

DEVELOPER
The Aristocrats

PUBLISHER
Slitherine Ltd

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia RTX 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3Qdb6z9

TERRAN IT UP

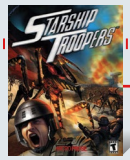
As I said, though, *Terran Command* is about substance rather than style. In play, it most closely resembles Relic's *Company of Heroes*, with the focus squarely on managing your squads in the field, rather than your base. In fact, *Terran Command* places even greater weight on the action, with what little base-building you do being prescribed by each mission's stringent allocation of resources.

But the similarities are mainly structural. Tactically, *Terran Command* is a very different game. For one, there's no cover system, because you can't really hide from an enemy whose main strategy is to swarm your position and then bite you in half. Instead, tactics revolve around establishing a strong base of fire to hold back the swarm. Your various rifleman squads, which form the meat of your army, cannot fire through one another, and so must be lined up across the battlefield to maximise their damage output.

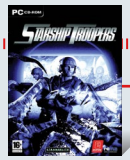
It's a system clearly inspired by the friendly-fire scene in the 1997 film. A solid line of fire will generally keep the warrior bugs at bay, so when they do start to chomp through your ranks, it's usually because you messed up. You tried to squeeze your troops through a narrow rocky pass at the wrong moment, or you just clumped them together and threw them forward like you would in any speed-based RTS.

Another example of this is how *Terran Command* handles the

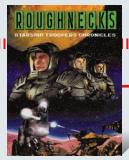
TIMELINE *Starship Troopers has a gaming history best described as 'uneven'*



2000
Starship Troopers: Terran Ascendancy



2005
Starship Troopers



2007
Starship Troopers: Roughnecks

2012
Starship Troopers: Invasion – Mobile Infantry

2015
The Pinball Arcade: Starship Troopers

2022
Starship Troopers: Terran Command

FAR LEFT: New squads and reinforcements are supplied by dropship.

LEFT: Hives need to be drained of their strength before your troops can clear them.

BELOW: You know what this game has a lot of? That's right, sand!

RIGHT: It's gonna take more than a can of Raid to deal with this.

FAR RIGHT: E-pulse troopers will carve through ranks of arachnids, but their weapons have short range.

BELOW: Engineers come equipped with flamethrowers that are great for crowd control.

Arachnids. In most missions, the map is dotted with Arachnid hives that'll keep spawning bugs until they are cleared out by your troops. Before you can do this, first you need to lure all the bugs out with a coordinated assault. Upon approaching a hive, it'll start spewing bugs at you. The closer you get, the more intense the bug defence becomes.

This hive system generates gruelling battles of attrition, as your squads gun down a seemingly endless torrent of bugs, often inches away from the barrel. But there's a tactical element to these battles too. Hives often have multiple entrances that spawn bugs, and they all slowly recharge even when emptied. But closing in on these entrances drains them quicker, giving you more chance to clear the central hive before the antechambers recharge. Hence, assaulting hives is all about advancing methodically.

These two systems form the crux of *Terran Command*'s strategy. But the campaign layers in complexity with each new mission. It starts throwing bugs at you that'll cut through your line of fire, such as spitter bugs that burn through your frontline with gobs of acid, or tiger bugs with tougher armour that standard rifle rounds can't penetrate. One of the most dangerous foes is the scorpion bug, which can incinerate even the toughest troops with a plasma beam unleashed from its tail.

To deal with these, you'll need to recruit the appropriate counter-units, such as snipers to burst spitter bugs before they can open their mandibles, or Mark II riflemen whose grenade launchers can shatter the carapace of a tiger. Other units, like the radioman, let you establish ad-hoc drop-zones where your squads can receive reinforcements via dropship. This helps you maintain the pace of your assault, and is also a nod to the spacey bits of Starship Troopers.

HORDE MODE

The campaign does a great job of spinning out these ideas into entertaining scenarios. While individual missions generally have an offensive or defensive emphasis, most will involve a mixture of the two. The fifth mission, for example, sees you trying to repair a power station while defending your base from relentless attacks from nearby hives. Typically, you don't have enough troops to complete both objectives, so you need to rely on your engineers' ability to construct manned turrets that'll keep the hordes at bay. One of the most dramatic missions puts you in charge of defending Fort Meru, a Federation base under bug assault. Throughout the mission, you fall back through defensive lines, using limited resources to protect the fort, which Command has ordered under no circumstances may fall.

One of the most dramatic missions puts you in charge of Fort Meru

One of my favourite aspects of *Terran Command* is how it explores the idea that your true enemy is not the one in front of you, but the one behind. Your squads are constantly under-manned, under-equipped, and under pressure to perform. Even if they succeed in their objectives, that's no guarantee the mission itself will be a success. One scenario sees you squad trapped behind enemy lines after their dropships are downed by plasma bug artillery. Command claims it can't send in a rescue team until the artillery bugs are killed.

So you scrape together a force and hunt down the bugs, only for Command to say it can't send the rescue ships anyway, and you'll have to evacuate on foot. Through its scenario structure, *Terran Command* demonstrates an acute understanding of the death-cult mentality of authoritarian regimes, how no amount of loyalty, patriotism, or compliance will make you any less disposable when it suits the whims of those in power.

The overarching story is well, if simply, told with good writing and great voice acting making up for the general lack of visual flair. Cutscenes are comprised of static cartoons that don't fit with the game's more prosaic aesthetic, and while *Terran Command* can kick up the spectacle in larger battles, there are certainly ways to up the fireworks, such as a good dollop of physics and big juicy squibs. The audio design is excellent. The battle effects help compensate for the muted visuals, while the soundtrack perfectly captures the military bombast of the Federation.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

There are a few other issues worth highlighting. The game automatically assigns formations for groups of units, which is fine in most circumstances, but can be annoying if, say, you want to keep your engineers in reserve, rather than having them at the front where their flamethrowers can hold arachnids at bay. The difficulty is mostly well-balanced, but a couple of the smaller-scale missions are too strict in their demands, and stepping off the planned progression route even slightly will result in mission failure. The absence of a multiplayer mode also seems like a missed opportunity, although good single-player RTS campaigns are so rare these days that it seems churlish to complain about the lack of multiplayer.

In any case, it's safe to say that *Terran Command* is the best Starship Troopers game ever made, although given the only real competition is from the 20-year-old *Terran Ascendency*, that isn't enough of a compliment. *Terran Command* is a smart expansion upon Verhoeven's film that's a spit and polish away from being something special. At a time when the single-player RTS scene is drier than Kwalasha, I welcome it with open arms. ■

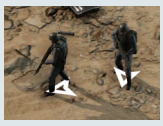
COMBINED ARMS

Here's a basic guide to fielding a strong army

RIFLEMAN
Essential for holding back the Arachnid hordes, but vulnerable to attack by other bugs.

ENGINEER
Can build turrets to take the pressure of your units, and stop bugs in with its flamethrower.

SNIPER
Useful for eliminating harassing bugs, like the spitter and the flying hopper.



RADIOMAN
Units with a radioman can reinforce in the field, making them much more durable.

ROCKET TROOPER
Crucial for dealing with larger bugs, like the tanker bug and the scorpion.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Come on you apes, get *Terran Command* downloaded and splat some bugs for the Federation!

80

ABOVE: Some locations are so big you'll leave your raft for days.

RIGHT: This ought to fill me up.

BELOW: Land is just as dangerous as the ocean.

A BIGGER BOAT

Survive a waterlogged world by crafting a floating base in RAFT

By Christopher Livingston

Our oceans may be clogged with plastic trash, but here's a small silver lining: all that garbage is keeping me alive. In open world survival game *Raft*, which spent four years in early access before hitting 1.0 in June, I used tons of floating trash to turn a tiny wooden raft into a floating base of operations – a big, cluttered, oddly shaped floating base, but it's packed with life-saving amenities and I've slowly come to love it like a home.

Just like my raft itself, *Raft* the game took quite a while to fall in love with. The first few hours were so rough I probably would have just quit if I weren't writing a review. With just four squares of wood to stand on, I slogged through the opening hours, constantly near death from malnutrition and dehydration, feverishly casting a brittle plastic hook into the waves to fish out every last bit of trash I could, piece by piece. I fought off a hungry shark with a crude spear made from planks, I scurried onto tiny passing islands to gather handfuls of fruit to eat, and drifted miserably across the sea on a little raft I couldn't stop or steer or control. Those early hours were frantic, stressful, and not much fun at all.

But after a few hours of surviving (and frequently swearing) I used my collected garbage to make my raft a little bigger, unlocked new blueprints that allowed me to craft more useful items like a seawater purifier, a fishing rod, and a grill for cooking, and without having to worry about death quite so constantly I eventually discovered an engrossing survival experience. Eventually I went from wanting to quit *Raft* to finding it extremely hard to stop playing, and helping me sail through the choppy opening hours into more enjoyable waters was the realisation that the river of trash on the endless ocean wasn't just letting me build stuff. It was leading somewhere.

I went from wanting to quit to finding it extremely hard to stop playing

Raft isn't just a matter of crafting and survival, it's a curious mystery to solve with a story that slowly reveals itself. Drifting from island to island, chopping down spare trees for wood and digging up ore from the seabed eventually allowed me to craft technology like a radio receiver, a battery, and some antennas. A signal then led me to a mysterious, rusting radio tower poking out of the sea, and the clues I gathered there gave me a pip on my radar screen. This led me to another location, and then another, which gave all that crafting more of a purpose than simply catching enough fish to avoid starvation.

Following the story also led to some genuinely exciting moments. After spending days on end visiting only tiny, wimpy little islands, seeing something truly massive looming on the horizon was a thrill. I came across a huge abandoned yacht, a massive outpost built from cargo containers, and a mountainous national park rising above the waves. Most importantly, these story areas gave *Raft* a welcome change of pace by letting me wander away from my floating base to explore, sometimes for days at a time.

FULL STEAM AHEAD

The real turning point was when I was able to bolt a wood-burning engine and a steering wheel onto my raft. Finally, after helplessly floating wherever the wind took me, I could actually pilot my big messy base in any direction I wanted. Even better, I was able to line the edges of my raft with nets that automatically collected any trash I floated over, so I bid a not-so-fond farewell to the long hours spent fishing trash out of the sea with my hook. Being able to automate some survival chores left more time to just enjoy the ride.

While I didn't enjoy the opening hours of *Raft*, it really grew on me the more I played, and I love how the crafting progression felt empowering, with new items like the engine and steering wheel giving the game a different feel. *Raft* became a different game, a much better one, where instead of a mostly-helpless passenger I was an intrepid explorer and the world was my oyster. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world survival game where you build a floating base on an endless ocean

EXPECT TO PAY
£17.50

DEVELOPER
Redbeet Interactive

PUBLISHER
Axolot Games

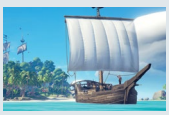
REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

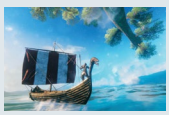
LINK
raft-game.com

SHIP SHAPE

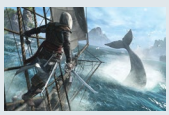
Gaming boats that are sturdier than my rickety raft



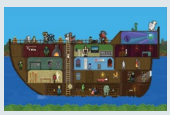
SEA OF THIEVES
The sloop may be slow, but she's fast, and a cosy little boat to boot.



VALHEIM
There's no feeling quite like taking a Viking longboat for a cruise in some perilous waters.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: BLACK FLAG
Fond memories of exploring the seas while the crew sings.



YOU MUST BUILD A BOAT
An endless dungeon runner, match-3 game, a boat-builder, all in one.

FAR: CHANGING TIDES
Part ship, part submarine, and easily the most memorable boat in games.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A choppy start leads after a few hours to a very compelling open world survival game experience.

80

COOL TITLES FOR NO CASH by Tom Sykes

In this puzzle, a disembodied voice demands more than just a basic straight line.

WITNESS ME

Solve puzzles aplenty in funny parody game THE LOOKER

While I'm sure that some parodies are made with outright derision for their subjects, it's hard to imagine them being as effective as this exquisite ribbing – a game that has clearly been made out of love for *The Witness*. *The Looker* is a next-level parody game that understands what makes *The Witness* great – and simultaneously a subject ripe for mockery. Happily, it's also a good puzzle game in its own right.

We should probably start with a potted history of *The Witness*. In Jonathan Blow's first-person puzzler, set on a mysterious and open-ended island, you advance by solving maze puzzles on computer screens. *The Looker* shares its robust low poly aesthetic, philosophical audio diaries, and, naturally, its maze puzzles, although here there's a smaller, more linear island to explore.

That's not to say this is a small or even an unambitious game: there's a good couple of hours' worth of varied, inventive puzzling on offer. As in *The Witness*, on a basic level on each computer screen you're drawing a line between two specific points, but *The Looker* doesn't build on this to quite the same level as its inspiration. In Blow's game, complex and hidden additional rules are gradually introduced to the puzzle tablets, while the player becomes aware of clever out-of-the-box elements.

Tips the balance more in favour of out-of-the-box puzzles

The Looker tips the balance more in favour of out-of-the-box puzzles, rewarding sideways thinking perhaps even more than *The Witness* does. For example, there's a bit where the tablet looks like weapon sights, and solving the puzzle triggers nearby cannon fire. Hmm, what if I angle the camera so that the (transparent) tablet is hovering over that distant ship? *Aha*, the ship will sink when I solve the puzzle tablet again. *The Looker* teaches you the rules of the game and invites you to consider how they apply to the world

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person puzzle game that parodies Jonathan Blow's The Witness

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Subcreation Studio

PUBLISHER
Subcreation Studio

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/TheLooker

WIT'S END

It does all that while taking the piss – and the self-serious *Witness* is a game perfect for mockery. Parodical elements show up everywhere, from the bitter ex-hint button stuffed in a bin to the presentation of the central maze puzzles. *The Witness*' clean, flowing lines and minimalist computer screens have been replaced by sketchy mazes, on which you scribble childish lines in red biro.

And it's in the puzzles themselves, of course, which include a preposterous shooting gallery and an arcade cabinet that blends *The Witness* with Nokia classic *Snake*.

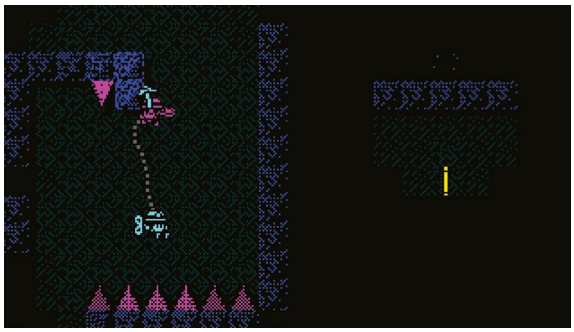
Drawing tiny lines around mazes without touching the walls can be annoying enough, but a couple of the later puzzles take the frustration to eleven. Even so, this is a masterful parody – a labour of love – that goes way beyond what anyone would reasonably expect from it. ■

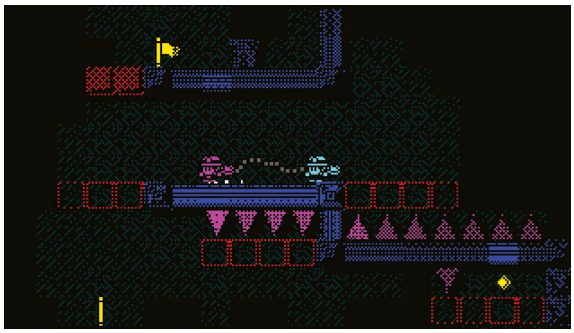
PC GAMER VERDICT

A laser-targeted send-up of a classic puzzle game, which manages to pack in plenty of good ideas of its own too.

78

BELOW: You'll have to unhook at the right moment, or die to these spikes.





ENOUGH ROPE

Hanging by a thread in climbing platformer TOY CAVERS

Climbing in games is too often a frictionless activity, with Nathan Drake or Lara Croft scrambling up sheer walls with no sense of gravity or danger. The most we can expect is an occasional QTE, with a quick hop back to a checkpoint if we miss a handhold and plummet out of bounds.

Toy Cavers, by contrast, *nails* what I want from climbing in games. While not attempting to be a simulation, climbing nevertheless feels weighty and perilous. You can feel the tension and slack of the rope, and the mass of the other climber when they're dangling from it.

Yes, you play as *two* climbers in this retro-styled platformer, who are wielding axes and tethered together by a length of rope. Climbing is a process of securing one climber to the side of a wall, then using momentum to swing the other to distant handholds. Once they're attached, you have to get climber A across. But have you left yourself enough rope, or will you swing head-first into that row of spikes?

However, even when a room is spikeless and you can leap around it without fear of death, there's still the prospect of missing a jump and tumbling to the ground. As the leaps increase in difficulty, so does the inherent tension. Missing a jump can mean restarting the climb, clearing walls resistant to pickaxes and tricky platforms suspended in the air.

These satisfying mechanics are married to an attractive 8-bit platformer with a wonderful soundtrack. Play if you like a challenge, and doubly so if you like climbing, as *Toy Cavers* is a game that gets both right. ■

82

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Ismael Rodriguez	bit.ly/toycavers

GOOD GRIDDANCE

Decking the king in tactical card game PAPER SOLDIERS

With parallels to Russia's horrifying invasion of Ukraine, *Paper Soldiers* is a game about saving a land from a tyrannical ruler. You do this, across a short campaign, by building a deck. In each area you have to deploy cards tactically to both manage your resources and repel the king's forces.

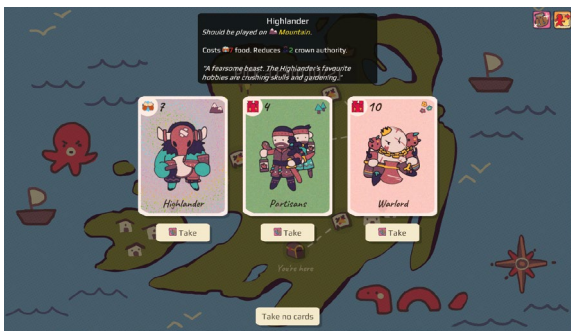
There are a smattering of stages, each one on a 5x5 grid consisting of medieval farmland, wilderness, and town tiles. These tiles accept cards, which are randomly drawn every turn from your deck and which can be plonked down to replenish your dwindling resources.

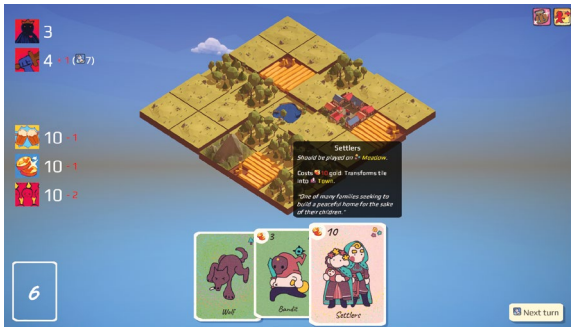
The placement matters greatly, because if a resource depletes to zero you'll lose the game. For example, the farmer produces four food – when you drop his card onto a wheatfield tile – but he ups that amount to six if there's a lake adjacent to it. Placed cards can't be shifted until their cooldown expires. At the end of every turn, the invading king will pilfer some of your resources. Can you raise the funds for your attack cards?

Though it's not very challenging, you'll want to furrow your brow and stare at your cards before using them – especially as they're reversible. At the touch of a button you can view the card backs, although using either side also removes the *other* half of the card from play. I can see how certain elements could be embellished. As it stands, the map is linear and small, while the deckbuilding is straightforward: you add a few, more powerful cards after every encounter. While it lasts this is a novel game that mixes card placement with fun deckbuilding. ■

77

BELOW: You earn cards after every stage.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	LINK
Free	Andriy, Leela, Serhii	bit.ly/PaperSoldiers

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott

Am I supposed to loathe the yuppie snake? I sincerely hope so.

LIZARD WARNING

YOOKA-LAYLEE strums the banjo

I wonder how many monstrous combinations the *Yooka-Layee* team went through before settling on a chameleon and bat. Vulture and tortoise? Too wizened. Peacock and skink? Too flashy. Eagle and rattlesnake? Too much like a frightening man's forearm. In the end, the choice seems to have been made because bats puns are simple and slurping butterflies with an extendable tongue feels amazing. *Blomp!*

It's interesting playing a game built on foundations laid 24 years ago. *Banjo-Kazooie* passed me by completely and chameleons give me night terrors, so I'll admit I'm not the target audience. Despite this, *Yooka-Laylee* has an endearing start. It looks great – an oversaturated explosion of tropical colours, like rinsing your eyes with full-fat milkshake. And the presentation is uplifting, with bright, bouncy menus that warble happily as I navigate them. Surely, not even the most curmudgeonly old toad could get tired of those? *Surely?*

There's something about *Yooka-Laylee*, however, that feels rather hollow. It asks the important question, 'what if bees were bastards?', with corpulent apian businessman Capital B sucking up all the world's books for monetary gain. And generally, the designs are fun. But the story and dialogue add nothing. I'm not asking for *Disco Elysium* with double-jumps, but it feels like a missed opportunity to inject cheerful humour and solid motivation. Instead, *Yooka-Laylee* spends so much time winking at the player it becomes vaguely threatening. Plus there's only so many saucy puns about trouser snakes and bat ships you can take before you start to feel like you're trapped in a suspiciously thumbed copy of Loaded magazine from 1997. Yes, it worked back then, but so did Pat Sharp and trainers the size of jukeboxes.

Devouring butterflies is so pleasing I'm almost tempted to try it IRL

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The 3D platforming equivalent of keeping all your calendars from 1998

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Playtonic

PUBLISHER
Team17

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3zHyrUn

BAT'S AMORE

Mechanically, it's a similarly uneven experience. Some of the moves feel great. Jumping is a dream, and devouring butterflies is so pleasing I'm almost tempted to try it IRL. But the first move I unlock, the ability to roll up steep surfaces, feels erratic and unsatisfying. Progression is locked behind certain abilities, you can unlock moves in any order. A cool, open-ended idea in theory; but almost impossible in a game with disjointed levels and ropey signposting. The camera, too, feels like the most authentic piece of retro design in Yooka-Laylee, in that it's as difficult to navigate the game's 3D space as it would have been during the 90s using a selfish cousin's sticky off-brand pad. Over time, these annoyances sour most of what's great about the game. *Yooka-Laylee* isn't hateful; it's just never as smart, sassy, or essential as wants to be. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Some great ideas and endearing designs are hidden behind a desperate desire to cling onto the past.

66

BELOW: Even the catering trucks on Chuck Norris films were dangerous.

MORSEL ENEMIES

The original OVERCOOKED is a recipe for disaster

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY	DEVELOPER	PUBLISHER
£13	Ghost Town Games Ltd	Team17

***Overcooked* is a liar. It wants you to believe it's all bouncy text and goofy smiles and gently strumming guitars. But beating beneath its starched white apron of falsehood is a shrivelled heart, poisoned by malice and condemnation. Friendships don't just wither here; they're chopped, boiled, baked, fried, blended, then scraped into the food refuse bin.**

You might argue that this is my fault and not the game's, and that it says more about my ability to work efficiently as part of a team than it does *Overcooked*'s design. Allow me to throw an onion at your head by way of reply. If reality TV cooking shows have taught me anything, other than the right way to cook scrambled eggs, it's that someone must be spasming with rage at all times. I am apparently that someone. Don't be deceived by the animated racoon I've picked as my avatar: inside I'm channelling hippo-eyed culinary gargoyle Marco Pierre White, a man so frightful he even made Gordon Ramsey cry.

This might make *Overcooked* sound like it's no fun, but experience it with someone who isn't hatred shaped like a man and it's a co-op delicacy: taut, breathless, funny, and chaotic; a game where serving the final meal in the dying seconds of a round is as triumphant as beating most bosses. Some of the levels detract from the enjoyment of the game but most of the time it all hangs together beautifully. And if it's OK for the Onion King to encourage me to use his own people as ingredients, it's fine for me to give my partner PTSD because they served up a burger without the patty. ■

81

LOVERS IN A DANGEROUS SPACETIME

Often, in romance movies, disparate characters fall for each other after being forced to work together. Hardship and camaraderie unite them. *Lovers in a Dangerous Spacetime* feels like the same thing in reverse. A blossoming relationship can be smashed to ruins once you witness a potential paramour's inability to operate a shield generator. The game even plays with this concept, with some levels dividing up your spaceship in half, splitting your abilities like you're allocating chattels during a messy divorce. When things click, however, the game is a celebration of working together, as satisfying as a meaty high-five. ■

81

KUUKIYOMI: CONSIDER IT

Consider It feels like penance after the rancour of *Overcooked*: a game in which you compete to be the most thoughtful player. In practice it's like *Wario Ware* for the socially submissive, but instead of squeezing tubes of toothpaste you're observing the correct queuing etiquette or pretending to sleep so you don't make things awkward for Father Christmas. There's even a game where you have to usher your demure girlfriend away from horny lions at the zoo. It sounds deranged, but it's actually such a strong test of character I'm considering implementing it as part of future interview processes so I can root out sociopaths. Oh, sitting *there* are we? *Fine*. ■

72

MY FRIEND PEDRO

Rounding up the theme of comradeship we have *My Friend Pedro*: a game about a man who embraces murder at the behest of a sentient banana. It's a shaky excuse for endless gun violence. It's amazing when it works and even better when it doesn't: like when I backflip over two goons, miss both of them, then land headfirst on a floor between them. It's the action game equivalent of sneaking up behind a guard, trying to snap their neck, and just making them look very quickly to the left. ■

78

TURBO
GOLF RACING
OUT NOW ON GAME PASS
& STEAM EARLY ACCESS
STEAM
Windows
XBOX ONE
XBOX SERIES X|S

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

94

GROUP TEST

Budget cases that let you save your cash for better components.

98

TECH REPORT

The history of PC fashion – and the death of RGB?

100

TECH TALES

The days of games that demand a PC upgrade are over.

102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Find the right build for your budget with our expert guide.

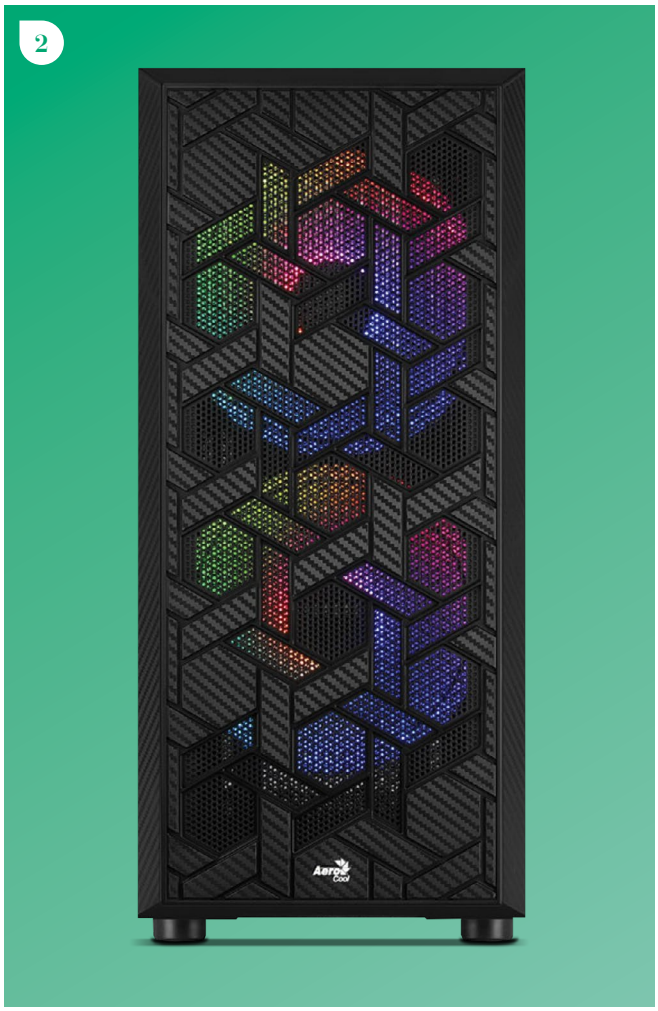
GROUP TEST

BUDGET CASES

Play it smart by saving money on your chassis and spending it on bigger and better components. *By Jacob Ridley*

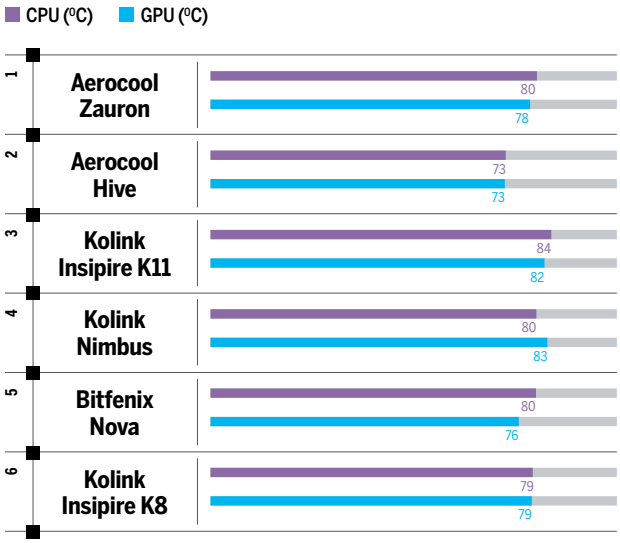
There's no denying the importance of a quality PC case in ensuring top performance out of your PC's parts. Your choice of case can mean the difference between optimal airflow and a weak breeze that could barely cool a capacitor. It can decide whether you have space for SSDs or have to stick one to the back of your motherboard tray with tack. It may even be the difference between a pain-free PC building experience and needing a plaster.

1



GO WITH THE FLOW

The main ingredient for an impressive PC case is airflow, but you'd be surprised by just how many case designs don't get this quite right. Ideally, we want our case to draw in cool air from a handful of high flow intake fans at the front, over our PC's components, then out the exhaust. Cheap cases, however, don't always come with the ideal number of fans for this optimal setup, so it's extra important to find one that is smartly designed to work with limited cooling potential. To test the thermal properties of these six cheap cases, I built a PC into each of them, then I ran a handful of benchmarks to put the CPU and GPU under day-to-day stress, and collated the average results into this graph.



Zauron

AEROCOOL £32

The budget case champ

1 The Aerocool Zauron is quite simply the most impressive budget case. Not only because it delivers what any PC gamer on a budget would need of it, but because it also does it on a shoestring budget. The Zauron is the cheapest case of the lot.

The layout of this case is exactly what is best for a case of this price tag and size, offering plenty of ventilation and space for an optimal fan setup. The PSU is fitted neatly away under a shroud and there's room for multiple fans or radiators in the front and top. On the side is a real tempered glass side panel, which is surprising on a case that asks so little. There's just one fan included, which is a bit of a knock to the Zauron because it's a single molex-powered fan with a fixed RPM. Yet average temperatures for both CPU and GPU are decent despite this. So while it may still have some of those cheap case flaws, much like the others, I can't argue with this case for the small sum of money demanded for it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- One of the cheapest cases we tested
- Simple design and effective layout
- Nice looking finish

SPECS SIZE: MID-TOWER / **2.5-INCH BAYS:** 4 MAX / **3.5-INCH BAYS:** 2 MAX / **MAX GPU LENGTH:** 325MM / **MAX FAN SUPPORT:** 6 X 120MM / **RGB LIGHTING:** FAN ONLY / **SIDE PANEL:** YES, GLASS / **FRONT PANEL:** POWER, RESET, AUDIO, 2 X USB 3.0

Hive

AEROCOOL £50

Keep it cool

2 The Aerocool Hive sits at the very edge of what I'd deem cheap enough for consideration. It just sneaks in there in this configuration, which comes with three fans in total, including two 140mm fans. There are also cheaper variants for less cash, so you have options here.

The Hive is absolutely a front-runner. It brings a smart and flexible layout, one not dissimilar to the Zauron, yet the inclusion of some fairly sizeable fans at a decent price helps make for an impressively cool case. These three fans are powered by individual SATA connections, so you have to bear with the set RPMs on offer. However, since the two front fans are 140mm in size they don't have to run as fast to deliver good cooling potential. The Hive posted the lowest temperatures on average, and while it isn't quite a match for the Zauron in price it is notably better for it. If you were planning to pick up the Zauron and a extra fan to go with it right away, you might want to consider the Hive instead.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- The best cooling out of the box
- Great layout
- Looks good

SPECS SIZE: MID-TOWER / **2.5-INCH BAYS:** 3 MAX / **3.5-INCH BAYS:** 2 MAX / **MAX GPU LENGTH:** 317MM / **MAX FAN SUPPORT:** 8 X 120MM / **RGB LIGHTING:** FANS ONLY / **SIDE PANEL:** YES, GLASS / **FRONT PANEL:** POWER, RESET, AUDIO, 2 X USB 3.0, 1 X USB 2.0

Inspire K11

KOLINK **£40**

Look, a proper fan

3 The Kolink Inspire K11 is a picture of a modern mid-tower PC case, and I have to say I'm actually rather surprised by the general level of quality manufacturing with this case. It's very well put together, and while there are still a few signs of its budget roots, the case does well to mitigate those with a few smart decisions.

This is the only cheap case I tested that comes with a PWM fan able to be plugged directly into the motherboard. That means full control and fan curves. The included Umbra aRGB 120mm fan is installed in the rear of the case, which does leave you without a front intake fan for optimal airflow, but does light up all the colours of the rainbow.

Though it's worth noting that out of the box that single fan doesn't deliver particularly impressive thermal performance. That said, the Inspire K11 is pretty flexible, and if it wasn't for the fact that other cheap cases deliver a little more out of the box, this would be one of the best.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- → Proper PCIe slot covers
- → Surprisingly snazzy layout
- → No US availability

SPECS SIZE: MID-TOWER / **2.5-INCH BAYS:** 4 MAX / **3.5-INCH BAYS:** 2 MAX / **MAX GPU LENGTH:** 315MM / **MAX FAN SUPPORT:** 8 X 120MM / **RGB LIGHTING:** FAN AND FRONT / **SIDE PANEL:** YES, GLASS / **FRONT PANEL:** POWER, RESET, AUDIO, 1 X USB 3.0, 2 X USB 2.0

Nimbus

KOLINK **£47**

Styling on a budget

4 Kolink's Nimbus is relatively flashy case considering its bargainous intention. With an RGB LED strip surrounding the front fan vent and a tempered glass side panel, it has all the makings of a more pricey case.

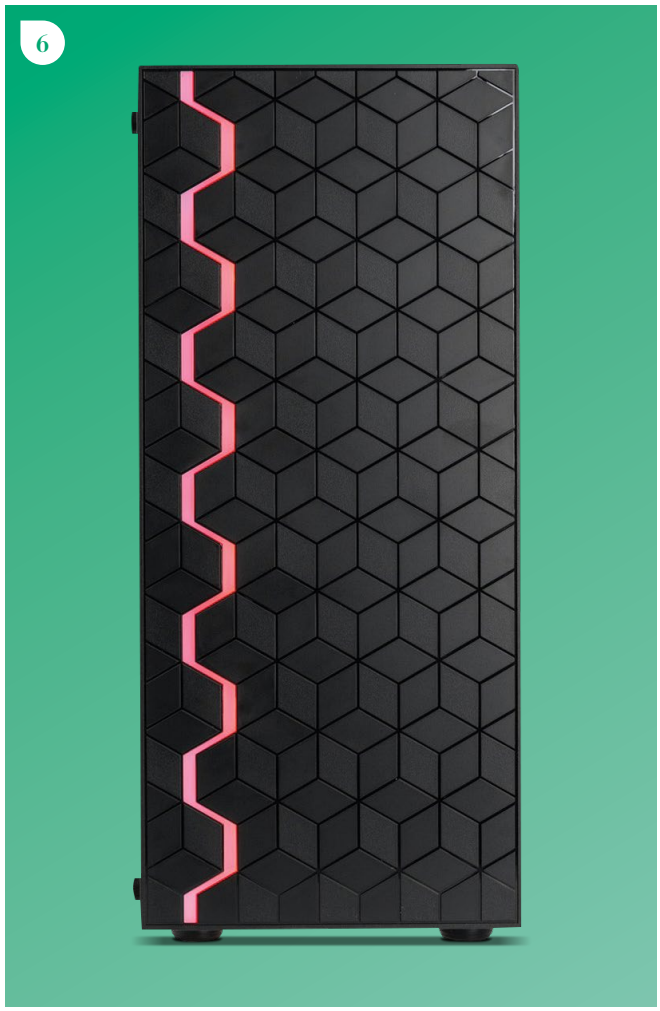
The Nimbus features a solid layout that should be familiar to most PC gamers, and one that's tried and tested. It's also one of the Nimbus' best features because of the number of possible mounting points for cooling. Only a single fan comes pre-installed in the rear of the case, however, and doesn't do a stellar job. The RGB cable on the Nimbus couldn't reach the correct header on the NZXT N7 motherboard I used for testing, either, which means I had to control this via the front panel rather than my motherboard.

The Kolink has all the makings of a flexible PC case for a wide range of uses, and it does look great. However, it is let down by a few weak points, and I'd suggest you pick up a second fan.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- → Glass side panel
- → No US availability
- → Second fan is recommended

SPECS SIZE: MID-TOWER / **2.5-INCH BAYS:** 4 MAX / **3.5-INCH BAYS:** 2 MAX / **MAX GPU LENGTH:** 315MM / **MAX FAN SUPPORT:** 6 X 120MM / **RGB LIGHTING:** FRONT / **SIDE PANEL:** YES, GLASS / **FRONT PANEL:** POWER, RESET, AUDIO, 1 X USB 3.0, 2 X USB 2.0



Nova

BITFENIX £43

Storage galore and nothing more

5 With two 120mm fans, heaps of storage bays, and a glass side panel, the Bitfenix Nova is shooting above its weight class. It even manages to squeeze in support for disc drive, for the people still rocking one of those. For its large storage capacity, the Bitfenix Nova offers a slightly less than optimal layout. A top-to-bottom storage cage takes up most of the front of the case, leaving zero room for a liquid cooler and potentially blocking off airflow, at least with a couple of hard drives installed. That said, with only an NVMe SSD installed, the CPU and GPU run at okay temperatures. The case also rattles something fierce for all the drive bays.

The Bitfenix Nova is a case with a lot of room for storage expansion, and in that sense there are no others I've tested that are a match for it. However, it's a little bland to look at, and the ill-fitting nature of the drive bays, and the position of them, does make me wonder how practical this case will be once it's filled up.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- → **Glass side panel**
- → **Lots of expansion options**
- → **Paint job doesn't match**

SPECS SIZE: MID-TOWER / **2.5-INCH BAYS:** 3 MAX / **3.5-INCH BAYS:** 4 MAX / **MAX GPU LENGTH:** 280MM / **MAX FAN SUPPORT:** 3 X 120MM / **RGB LIGHTING:** NONE (WHITE LED FAN) / **SIDE PANEL:** YES, GLASS / **FRONT PANEL:** POWER, RESET, AUDIO, 2 X USB 3.0

Inspire K8

KOLINK £40

Interesting but underwhelming

6 The Kolink K8 is straightforward PC case. It's a fairly nondescript box with space for your precious PC components, plenty of ventilation, and room for expansion. It has some flair with a snazzy RGB strip down the front of the case, matching the cuboid pattern on its front, and the cut-out on top is a little more exciting than most.

You can build a PC inside the Inspire K8 without hitting any pain points, at the very least. There is only a single SATA-powered 120mm RGB fan pre-installed in this machine, though being so well ventilated it does do a fairly good job of keeping temperatures down. It could be mightily improved with another fan or two. I did run into a bigger issue with this case, however. Since there's no CPU cable cutout in the motherboard tray, I had to run that right the way across my build. The Kolink isn't terrible, it's just simply not a match for other cases I've tested in terms of value or features.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- → **Best looking RGB on a cheap case**
- → **Actual glass side panel**
- → **A little pricey**

SPECS SIZE: MID-TOWER / **2.5-INCH BAYS:** 4 MAX / **3.5-INCH BAYS:** 2 MAX / **MAX GPU LENGTH:** 300MM / **MAX FAN SUPPORT:** 6 X 120MM / **RGB LIGHTING:** FAN, FRONT / **SIDE PANEL:** YES, GLASS / **FRONT PANEL:** POWER, RESET, AUDIO, 2 X USB 3.0, 1 X USB 2.0

When iCUE loses your profile and your RGB colours revert to default.

HIP TO BE SQUARE

The rise and fall of the gamer aesthetic

In 1965, Coco Chanel said, "Mode passes, style remains," and while the iconic fashion house founder probably didn't have RGB standing desks or Razer Boomslangs in mind as she said it, it's just as pertinent to our own strange little corner of cultural expression as it is to high fashion. Over the last decade we've seen a very distinctive visual theme emerge from PC hardware, one drenched in multicoloured lighting, scribbled with tribal designs like a lower league rugby player's arms, and built from black plastic into severe, angular shapes. The gamer aesthetic had us all in its thrall throughout the 2010s, but now manufacturers are steering away from it in favour of sleeker, more sophisticated product designs. Its days may be drawing to a close.

It existed at all because for so long beforehand PC gaming felt like sneaking in behind enemy lines and performing covert ops on beige machinery designed for much more sensible, productive pursuits. Indeed, that landscape of office-friendly, off-white hardware and peripherals is probably what prompted – ahem – gamer gear to take on such garish forms when it did emerge. Nobody knew quite how to sell home computers for about the first 20 years. They were boxes of amazing, unprecedented computational power, and they could do all sorts. But what should their manufacturers lead with when trying to convince people to swap large piles of money for them?

ALL WORK, NO STRAFE

IBM's 1981 ad for their personal computer featured a Charlie Chaplin impersonator building one in an otherwise all-white void while a voiceover emphasised its benefits to productivity. Apple's 1982 'The Most Personal Computer' ad focused on how easy it was to learn in vignettes of different workplaces. These ads were game-free spaces. That continued into the 90s, where PC and ISP ads dropped in on adults clicking mice while nodding and smiling at their screens, and very occasionally a child might play an educational game.

So when gaming really did take hold on PC during the early and mid '90s, there was an air of guerrilla warfare about it. We'd snuck in among these wholesome pillars of productivity and learning, and had twisted this benign hardware to run shooters where heads exploded and satanic imagery lurked. Before manufacturers or advertisers could catch up, gamers had begun to dominate the personal computer.

So when hardware and accessories designed for gamers started to arrive on the market, they were an open goal. They generally offered a practical benefit, like the iconic Razer Boomslang's massive shooter-focused left and right mouse buttons and 2,000 DPI sensitivity (most mice at the time had about 400 DPI of resolution), but just as importantly they

The old bill

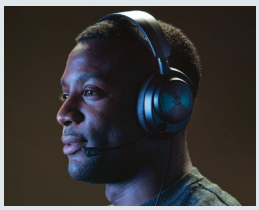
In case you're wondering whether RGB might decline in popularity due to the energy cost crisis – probably not. One RGB lighting strip draws about 3W of power, so unless you're running an awful lot of them you probably won't notice a massive difference to your energy bill.

CASE STUDIES

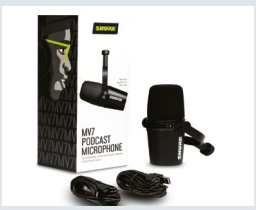
Four big manufacturers ditching the old look

EPOS
Since the Danish company acquired Sennheiser's gaming headset range it's added extra Scandi minimalism.

LOGITECH G
The old stalwart's new range is supposed to appeal to everybody, not just teenage boys. Notice the colours other than black.



STEELSERIES
The latest refresh of the Arctis, the Pro Nova, looks like something you'd be handed on a first-class Emirates flight.



SHURE
This MV7, the go-to streaming mic for high-end setups is all Shure pro audio heritage, no nonsense. Looks amazing.

LEFT: Before long this will look so dated it'll start appearing in Buzzfeed '2010s kid' listicles.

BELOW: The revered Area 51, as it appeared on Alienware's online store circa '08.

looked strikingly different to your dad's office machine. They were a flag in the ground, staking territory for gamerkind.

Through the '00s, graphics cards became big business but peripherals designed solely for gamers stayed out on the margins. We were building our own PCs in unprecedented numbers, but remained basically happy to plug an IntelliType and any old USB mouse into our new creations.

But one company in particular recognised the value of aesthetics to gamers: Alienware. Its Area 51 gaming PC was so strikingly different from anything else on the market in 2006, with that xenomorph skull-like shape, and those aggressive grilles on the lower half, that it immediately seemed to become one of the most recognisable images in PC gaming. And that's despite the fact that nobody could actually afford one, since they retailed at over £3,500 – in 2006 money, that was a house in the north of England with enough change left over for T4 On the Beach tickets.

Alienware nailed the gaming culture zeitgeist so well at that moment in time that Dell came knocking, and the company's approach to PC, monitor and peripheral design became very influential. Suddenly beige looked hopelessly old-fashioned and black replaced it on every surface it had previously occupied. Monitor bezels, side panels, keyboards, mice, headsets, and gamepads now had to be darkest obsidian.

LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

How we got from there to desks drenched in RGB and mechanical keys probably has a lot to do with the streaming boom. Once we started broadcasting ourselves playing, the appearance of our environments mattered like never before. RGB shows up nicely on camera, but importantly it's also customisable, so you can craft a coherent theme between peripherals even if they're from different manufacturers.

But there's also a parallel with car tuner culture, as University of Sydney's Dr Marcus Carter pointed out. Like neon underglows on a tricked-out Fiat Punto, RGB demonstrates a pride in our hardware and a level of technical accomplishment in maintaining it. It's just that it makes our PC setups look like an insane fairground ride in our bedroom.

SUDDENLY BEIGE LOOKED HOPELESSLY OLD-FASHIONED AND BLACK REPLACED IT

Of all things, esports is our saviour in this regard. The more manufacturers collaborated and consulted with competitive players, the more they heard that having RGB zones on mice, let alone headsets and, for goodness sakes, standing desks, was not just unnecessary but unwelcome and distracting to pro players. As a result, we've seen those lighting zones diminish in the last couple of years, and many more products enter the market – Steelseries' Arctis headsets, Logitech's low-profile G915 keyboard – that don't speak to that established gamer aesthetic but aim for something more grown-up.

That's it, really – growing up. Gaming culture is old enough now that it doesn't have to discern itself from mainstream PC usage, because it is mainstream PC usage. You're not a terrible person if you like bright lights or superfluous black plastic fins on things, but neither are you sticking it to the computing industry mainstream. Because for a long time already, the gamer aesthetic has represented the mainstream. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

TECH TALES

SYSTEM SHOCK

The games that forced our hand to upgrade

It doesn't happen very often now. *Cyberpunk 2077* came the closest in recent years, with its knack for a hype-baiting E3 sizzle reel and complex lighting up the wazoo. Before that, *Metro Exodus* and *Battlefield V* got some of the old nerve endings tingling too. But truth be told, there hasn't been a bona fide, upgrade-your-PC-at-all-costs-to-play-this-seismic-new-title moment in PC gaming for a long time now. So long, in fact, that you might even consider those days to be over.

And that's quite a profound moment, when you think about it. On the other side of the divide, console platform holders Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft buy first-party studios and pay them to put out irresistible games. Titles that extol the virtues of each new console release, and make a life without that hardware seem asinine and futile. They depend on those games, not the look or the specs of the console itself, to sell that console. It's always been this way, since 16-bit shootouts between fast hedgehogs in trainers and pipe-dwelling Italian workmen.

But it's different in PC gaming. There are no clear delineations between 'generations', other than the moments in cross-platform releases that coincide with new consoles. As consumers we might decide to usher in a new generation of PC gaming every year by buying a new machine, and that's always been the case. We've always had that agency.

But very few of us have had the means or the motivation to actually behave like such foppish techo-trend-chasers, tossing away perfectly good hardware 11 months after the Scan parcel arrived like clockwork. The stimulus has always been new games, just as it's been for console manufacturers.

QUAKE UP

This writer's first exposure to the must upgrade moment was *Quake III Arena* in 1999. It arrived at the end of a decade whose pace of change in PC gaming would forever be unrivalled, and when each year or two a new software release would offer something absolutely transformative. Consider that we went from *The Secret of Monkey Island* to *Quake III* Arena in nine years, and then look at the differences between *FIFA 14* and *FIFA 23*.

Although *Quake III* wasn't as dramatic a step forwards as *Doom* or the original *Quake*, it was doing something genuinely groundbreaking: multiplayer only. No story to speak of, just AI bot matches if you were offline. Since it was built with such a singular laser focus online multiplayer competition, there was a distinct and fresh zippiness about it, in its movement speed and weapon damage rates.

THERE ARE NO CLEAR DELINEATIONS BETWEEN 'GENERATIONS'

And that, in turn, gave you a real mandate for upgrading your PC. Because not only did this thing look absolutely extraordinary in its id Tech 3 engine finery, it also provided a real benefit to higher frame rates. Indeed, whereas 30fps was broadly seen as the acceptable standard for games in 1999 – and frankly we were happy enough with even 20-odd most of the time – here was a game that felt like it was simply operating at a different frequency to all the rest. 30fps didn't give you the sense of speed that was so central to the experience. Ergo – it was time for a new graphics card.

I remember the day I slotted that 3D Prophet Mk. II into my PC like some people remember their wedding days or when their kids were born. I loaded up the game and just sat, mesmerised, as I clicked on different models in the character select menu, admiring textures that only yesterday had looked indeterminate and now seemed impossibly photorealistic. That sowed a seed in my head, I think. My expectation for upgrading PCs and seeing that upgrade bear fruit in-game was set unfathomably high.

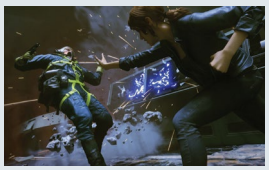
Games like this are our version of a new console generation. *Half-Life 2*, *Crysis*, assorted *Witcher*s, *STALKER*s, and *Elder Scrolls* releases arrived as if beamed down from superior life forces, their visuals inarguably more advanced than games that released even a month before them.

PHIL IWANIUK

Give Phil Iwaniuk 800 words and any remit, and he'll give you a story about *Quake III*. He's been saving for "a *Half-Life 3* mega-PC" since 2004. We don't have the heart to tell him.

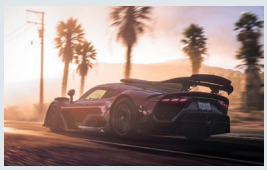
AS GOOD AS IT GETS *Four games that'll push your PC's limits in 2022*

CYBERPUNK 2077
Not perfect, but there's a lot of ray tracing happening in Night City. Looks staggering when you catch it just right.



CONTROL
Remedy's secret government facility full of Twilight Zone episodes is a visual feast of luxurious granite surfaces.

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR
The entire world, or at least Bing Maps' best approximation thereof. Very CPU-heavy.



FORZA HORIZON 5
Most of the resources are being spent on the cars, which are better than any in games before, but Mexico scrubs up well too.

MARGIN CALL

What these franchises all had in common, *Quake III* included, is that they were conceived by their creators with the PC in mind first and foremost. They could, then, pitch the fidelity level and system demands at a specific point in high-end PC componentry at the time, and that point would invariably be higher than closed-platform consoles allowed. But who cared about that – it's not like anyone would play an *Elder Scrolls* game on a console anyway.

So perhaps it's the fact that, as of the mid-noughties, they did start doing that exact thing, which explains the scarcity of the must-upgrade PC title. For decades now, devs have worked on cross-platform releases whose system resource ceilings fell way under a high-end PC's capabilities.

For the PC gamer, that's good and bad. Good, because we don't really need to upgrade in order to play the latest games maxed out, but also bad. Because we're now tied to console hardware generations, very rarely empowered to really show what our platform can achieve when creators properly tailor their games for it. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Go on. Guess. Guess which *FIFA* from the last decade this is.

BELOW: The urge to upgrade was once so fierce we'd risk death by incompetence/electrocution/bleeding.

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget

KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank

TOTAL

£948

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Pro RS** ASRock **£115** This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 12400F** Intel **£170** There's no iGPU on this chip but it's a little cheaper as a result, and will work great for this particular build.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GeForce RTX 3050** Nvidia **£239** This GPU will deliver 1080p performance easily, and with 8GB of memory it's built to last.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **£0** There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		**Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-2400** Corsair **£39** You could bump this to 16GB, but to save as much as possible we'll stick to 8GB.
POWER SUPPLY		**CV Series 550W** Corsair **£39** You could likely make do with less wattage, but Nvidia recommends a 550W PSU for the RTX 3050, so let's be safe.
SSD		**MX500 500GB** Crucial **£57** One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£37** You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		**Zauron** Aerocool **£32** This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		**GW2280** BenQ **£105** A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		**G213** Logitech **£40** It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		**G102** Logitech **£35** A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		**HS35** Corsair **£40** This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games

TOTAL
£1,665

MOTHERBOARD		**B660M Mortar WiFi** MSI **£180** This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		**Core i5 12400** Intel **£170** Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		**GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed.** Nvidia **£369** The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		**Laminar RM1 (included with CPU)** Intel **£30** Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while.
MEMORY		**Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB)** Crucial **£75** With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		**CX650M** Corsair **£93** The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		**A80 1TB** Silicon Power **£98** Silicon Power has delivered a high capacity, affordable SSD and has comes with some serious storage speed.
HDD		**WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm** Western Digital **£37** Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		**H7** NZXT **£120** It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		**S2722DGM** Dell **£260** With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		**Alloy FPS** HyperX **£80** As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		**Model O-** Glorious **£59** Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		**Blackshark V2** Razer **£94** The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds

TOTAL

£4,971

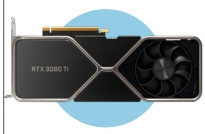
MOTHERBOARD

MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi
MSI £410
This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.

PROCESSOR

Core i9 12900K
Intel £599
Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.

GRAPHICS CARD



GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed.
Nvidia £1,199
The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.

COOLER

Kraken X63
NZXT £123
One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.

MEMORY

Trident Z5 RGB
G.Skill £421
This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.

POWER SUPPLY

SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold
EVGA £200
This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.

SSD

WD Black SN850 1TB
Western Digital £120
Though technically this platform support PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.

HDD

860 QVO 2TB
Samsung £195
Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.

CASE

5000D
Corsair £155
We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.

DISPLAY

34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW)
Alienware £1,099
You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.

KEYBOARD

G915 Lightspeed
Logitech £210
Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.

MOUSE

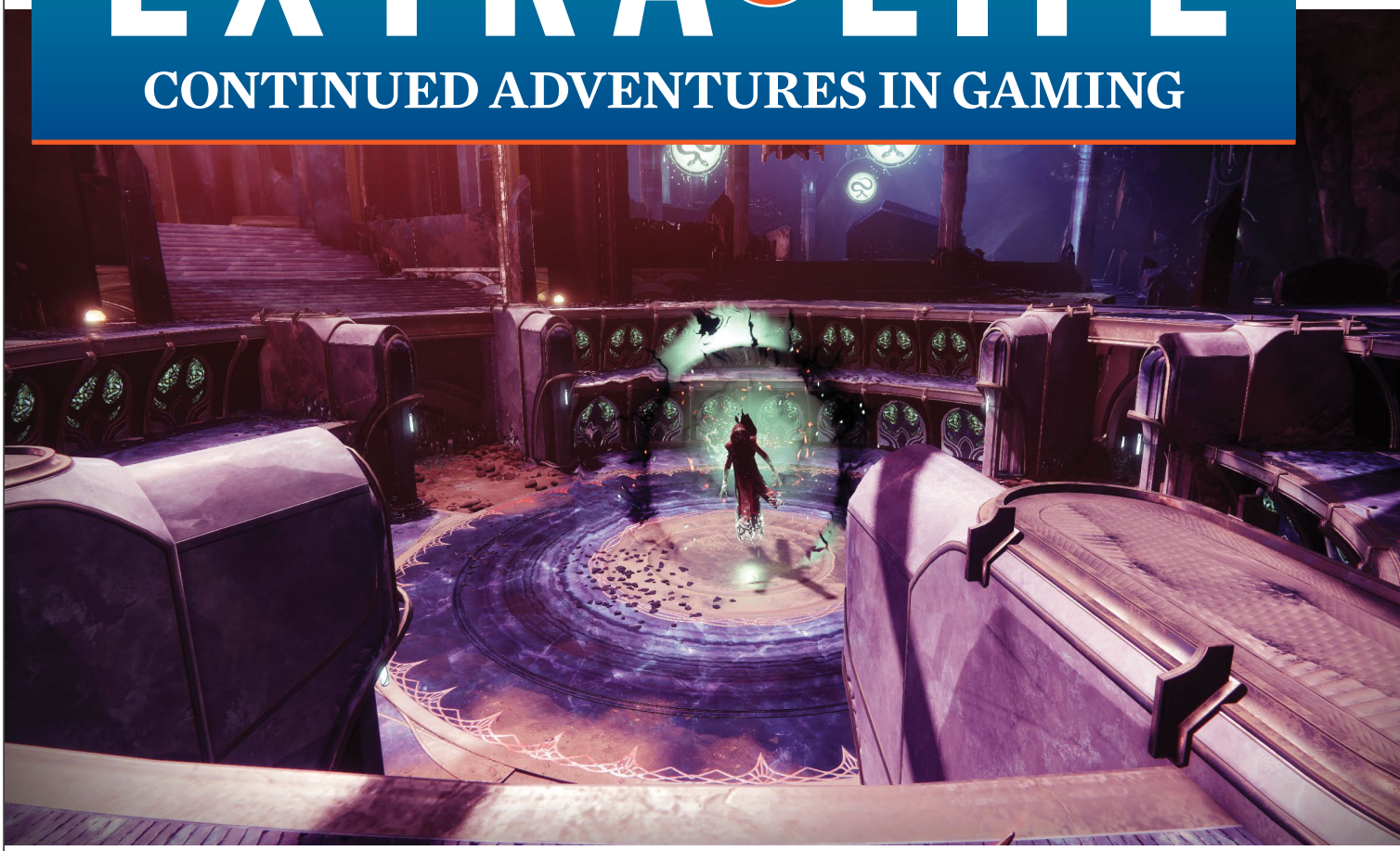
G502 Lightspeed
Logitech £110
With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

HEADSET

Arctis 7 Wireless
SteelSeries £130
If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



"It proves too much for Fraser, who stops responding to messages"

Introducing PC Gamer to DESTINY 2's raids

We're at the final boss of the Vault of Glass raid, and the damage is looking good. It's been a tough 40 minutes as the team learns how to call out Oracles and cleanse debuffs, but it feels like we've got this. Except something's missing. "Who's got Imminent Detain?" *Silence*. Then, six overlapping bubbles surround the team, wiping us all. The boss had just a pixel of health remaining.

For the past few months, I've been running a handful of the PCG team through *Destiny 2*'s raids. Our ragtag band has assembled with a mix of experience – both of the raids and the game at large. Guides writer Sean is a self-proclaimed *Destiny 2* addict, but has never stepped foot in a raid. Senior hardware editor Jacob is a *Destiny 1* veteran who'd never really clicked with the sequel. Former deputy editor Pip has previous *Destiny 2* raid experience, but is still gearing up after a break of a few years. Freelancer Tom Hatfield is my regular *Destiny* running buddy. Online editor Fraser seems to actively resent the game.

PHIL SAVAGE

THIS MONTH
Became the proud raid dad of the PCG team.

ALSO PLAYED
Stray, *Dead Cells*

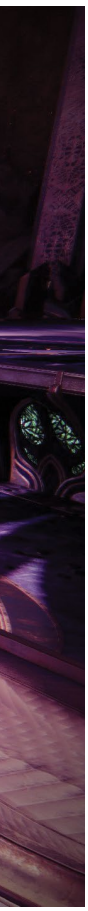
We start with Last Wish, despite it being *Destiny*'s longest raid. I have three reasons for doing this. 1) It's designed in a way that relies more on executing the mechanics than having great gear. 2) Sean seems to have an unusually strong attachment to swords, and Last Wish is one of the few raids where they're useful. 3) It's just really cool. You fight a dragon.

TOP: The first boss of many.

BIRD BRAIN

Last Wish also introduces the team to a handful of regular mechanics that Bungie draws on across multiple raids, like having to describe a specific picture to a person who cannot see that picture. It's a high-pressure situation, leading to moments where, for instance, we wipe because Jacob said "bird" when he meant "fish". Or where, moments later, I forget the difference between left and right.

COMPARED TO LAST WISH, VAULT OF GLASS IS ALMOST A HOLIDAY



It takes us six hours across two days but finally we defeat it. Despite the celebration, it proves too much for Fraser, who stops responding to Discord messages about future runs. For Vault of Glass, we sub in brand director Tim, who has thousands of hours with the game and vastly more raid experience than all of us. He still makes me explain the encounters, though. That's delegation.

Compared to Last Wish, Vault of Glass is almost a holiday. Despite our heartbreaking 0.1% health wipe, our successful completion comes after just two-and-a-half hours. Vow of the Disciple proves much tougher. It takes over four hours as we come to terms with its bewildering array of callouts, its chaotic third encounter, and its extended jumping puzzle.

At this point we're a well-oiled machine. Pip has learned that secondary weapons are sometimes useful. Sean has unequipped the sword. We went back to Last Wish for a second time, and knocked it out in just a couple of hours. All that's left is Garden of Salvation, whose final boss is a panic attack with no room to catch your breath. It'll be tough, but I believe the team can make it through. Whether they'll come back afterwards remains to be seen. ■

"Easy-to-learn, hard-to-master"

MULTIVERSUS is a hell of a combo

ROBIN VALENTINE

THIS MONTH
Got sick of getting smashed in the face with Finn's backpack.

ALSO PLAYED
Nioh, It Takes Two, Below

Last issue I talked about what I see as the future of fighting games – accessible, broad appeal action, shorn of barriers like complex inputs. Turns out that future may be arriving faster than I thought.

Multiversus pits characters from across Warner Bros stable of IPs against each other, resulting in playfully incongruous match-ups like Arya Stark vs Batman, or Tom and Jerry vs LeBron James. The *Smash Bros* influence is clear, both in the 'everybody's here!' roster and in the fighting, where dealing damage is just a means to the end of knocking your opponent clean out of the arena.

But within my first couple of matches, it became clear this is far more than just a cheap clone or IP-led cash grab. There's a real commitment to creating something accessible – even for very young players – yet brilliantly tactical.

I don't even really like *Smash Bros*, but I'm enthralled by *Multiversus*. It's the epitome of easy-to-learn, hard-to-master, combining limited movesets and a tight set of mechanics to create a web of possibilities.

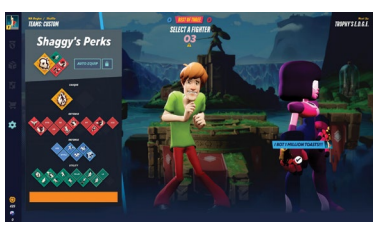
BRAWL ABOARD!

Its best twist is that it's built not around 1v1, but 2v2. Four players on screen gives you the energetic chaos of *Smash Bros*, but being paired up allows things to be more competitive than random. Characters synergise in all sorts of interesting ways, and unusually for a fighting game have actual support moves they can use to buff and reposition their allies.

Playing as Reindog, for example – a bizarre hybrid beast original to the game – I'm best off actually staying out of the brawl, hurling projectiles from afar to soften the enemy up, and using my magical 'tether' to yank my partner around while they land the finishing blows.

It's a level of genuine co-operation I'm not sure I've ever seen in the genre before. It adds an extra tactical layer to prevent the game drifting too far into simplicity, but at the same time it actually makes it *more* accessible. When you screw up, there's someone else there to pick up the slack. And you're encouraged to play with a friend, exchanging tips and helping each other learn.

And, with a load of ten year olds playing, I've finally found a fighting game online mode I can win at... ■



"The last time this universe felt like it wanted you to be a cutthroat killer"

Going back to ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE reminds me of the series' glory days

I think of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* as the last true *Assassin's Creed*. Although there have been three mainline entries since its 2015, not to mention the DLC they've come with, *Syndicate* stands out as the last time this universe felt like it wanted you to be a cutthroat killer rather than a historical warrior.

I played *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* at its original release, and loved it dearly. It gets the spirit of London right, with a good helping of the series' ridiculous historical sprinkles. Of course you can just meet Dickens on the road as you're talking about the Templars. Of course! It's not like London, even in Victorian times, would be huge and bustling, and pictures of people were rare enough that it would be hard to say for certain without a conversation that the author was really walking past. That doesn't matter, the Frye twins were bound to have known him.

Syndicate offers the best version of London in games. That's something the series gets right without fail, finding the authentic feel of its seetings. It's *Assassin's Creed*'s biggest strength by far.

IMOGEN MELLOR

THIS MONTH
Explored a virtual London, while living in physical London.

ALSO PLAYED
Valorant, *Slay the Spire*

FRYE UP

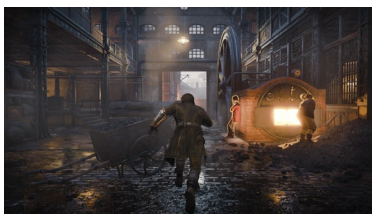
I've gone back to *Syndicate* because I'm missing the original *AC* series. There are pros and cons to the games moving on. They've expanded into massive RPGs and continue to entertain masses of fans. Largely sidelining the Assassin's vs Templars conflict has also freed the storyline up to head into other areas and historical events, with the two organisations just weaving in here and there when it's suitable. And if you like combat there are oodles of melee encounters to enjoy. But I really miss the simplicity of a clean, cold stab with a hidden blade.

SHE'S ALSO THE SMARTEST OF THE ASSASSINS WE'VE HAD THE PLEASURE OF PLAYING

The series, for a long time, lacked a mainline game with a female lead. *Liberation*, released in 2012, featured Aveline de Grandpré in 18th century Louisiana. Though technically the first female lead for the series, her game was a spin-off thrown onto the PlayStation Vita, so only a very small number of *AC* fans ever played it. *Syndicate* was the first real experience of a female lead in *Assassin's Creed* in my opinion, even if Evie does have to share the screen with her brother.

She's also the smartest of the assassins we've had the pleasure of playing. Level headed and focussed, Evie wants a piece of Eden, which we as a player know to be the key to the whole Assassin's versus Templar war. While her twin Jacob is building a jolly ol' gang, Evie is always thinking of the bigger picture. But it's his bombastic brawling that proved to be a glimpse of the series' future, rather than her careful espionage. A shame, but at least *Syndicate* still plays brilliantly years later. ■

Watch out, it's those lads with the fuzzy hats!



LEFT: Jacob always seems to be sprinting somewhere.

BELOW: Evie is the brains while Jacob is the brawn.

I don't remember this part of Cars.

"Princess Zelda and Max Payne shot into my broadside like a pair of fangs"

Playing mod roulette in demolition racer WRECKFEST

Wreckfest has Steam Workshop support, so before trying any normal race, I of course subscribed to a bunch of random mods. My first race took place on *Team Fortress* map 2Fort, and while I was still in the pre-race menu, all the other cars formed a car tornado around my car, which was actually a golf cart. They flung it into the water immediately after the race started.

I decided to use fewer mods, so my next race took place on a remake of a *Need for Speed 3: Hot Pursuit* track and my car was Lightning McQueen from Cars, but the physics were normal. I set the number of laps to ten, figuring it'd be most fun to race until everyone was demolished.

Seconds in, Sackboy clipped my rear wheel and spun me sideways, at which point I started to suspect that one of my mods had given all the drivers the names of popular videogame characters. I became sure of it moments later, when Princess Zelda and Max Payne shot into my broadside like a pair of fangs, flipping me onto my side.

TYLER WILDE

THIS MONTH
Went squirrel hunting as a cartoon race car.

ALSO PLAYED
Neon White, Strange Horticulture

ROAD RODENT

My collisions were more calculated after that. I introduced Solid Snake to a brick column and sent Gordon Freeman back to G-Man after he flipped his car on a guard rail. Sub Zero and Princess Zelda each briefly held the lead, but by the fourth lap, they too had tasted asphalt.

One racer, however, refused to leave me alone: Conker the Squirrel.

THE SQUIRREL SKIDDED AROUND THE CORNER, AND I GUNNED IT

We spent the whole race swiping and jabbing at each other. He was my nemesis, and when Master Chief finally crashed into a storefront on lap four, he became the only racer between me and victory. My car only had a sliver of health left, though, so I was driving scared, and his lead was growing. It was no good.

And then, a lightbulb moment: I hit the brakes, turned around, and waited. And waited. Finally, the squirrel skidded around the corner, and I gunned it. All or nothing, baby!

After the impact, I nudged Conker's car with McQueen's demolished face, and it rolled backward slightly. He was out. I was shocked that my plan had worked. But if it had worked, why hadn't the race ended? Turns out I'd made a bad assumption. The race doesn't end just because there's only one car left. I had five more laps to complete, and a sliver of a sliver of health left. I made it half a lap. Nobody won, but in the post-race summary, Conker was still listed in first place. Ah, that's right: he'd completed more of the race than I did. Nemesis!

OVERWATCH 2

Second PvP beta is a testing ground for new ideas. *By Morgan Park*

Keeping up with *Overwatch 2* changes is becoming a full-time job around these parts. Blizzard is in the midst of its second PvP beta for its unorthodox sequel to the original *Overwatch*, and trust me when I tell you that this is proving to be a true beta, warts and all.

We've known for a long time that *Overwatch 2*'s radical change to 5v5 (ditching one Tank role per team) would mean further balancing changes to the rest of its roster, but I certainly wasn't prepared for how drastically some heroes have been adjusted, or how different new heroes would be to use with fewer players on the map.

The stars of the latest balancing patch are Junker Queen, Moira, and Mercy. Junker Queen is a brand new Tank that I'm having fun with, but her playstyle is taking some serious getting used to. She's a bit like Roadhog, wielding a close-range shotgun alongside a throwable knife that can yank enemies toward her. Except where Roadhog's hook instantly pulls targets into the perfect point-blank range for a headshot, Junker Queen's knife only pulls a few meters, leaving it up to the player to close the rest of the distance and land a perfect shot. If she's in the perfect range, she can deal some of the highest burst damage in the game, but her low-spread/short-distance scattergun is an awkward combination. It's sort of like shooting a scope-less sniper rifle that only really works when you're a few feet away.

The rest of Junker Queen's kit revolves around lifesteal and sustainability. Stabs from Junker Queen's knife and swings from her cleaving axe activate a damage-over-time on enemies that simultaneously heals her, allowing her to stay in a fight longer than other Tanks as long as she's keeping up on bleeds.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 4, 2022

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
Activision Blizzard

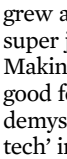
LINK
playoverwatch.com

HAVE MERCY

Blizzard is in the middle of a grand Mercy experiment. Starting with the first *Overwatch 2* meta in May, the studio started testing out ways to officially incorporate the super jump, a bug that allows Mercy to launch into the air with a series of inputs, into her kit.

Mercy's super jump lab began in May with the first beta. Back then, Blizzard gave Mercy the ability to easily launch into the air by pressing crouch while flying to a teammate with Guardian Angel. It was functional, but maybe a bit too strong considering she could indefinitely fly without touching the ground. Next came a super jump that seemed to make nobody happy: a vertical launch that'd happen automatically upon reaching the end of her Guardian Angel flight.

That brings us to the third iteration of the super jump: a meter that charges as Mercy flies with Guardian Angel that can be triggered for a dash in whichever direction she's facing. I like the idea behind this version the best, but whatever Blizzard ultimately decides on, I suspect longtime Mercy players who grew accustomed to the original super jump tech will be dissatisfied. Making the jump easier to execute is good for accessibility, but demystifying its status as 'secret tech' inevitably spoils some of the fun of mastering Mercy's moveset.



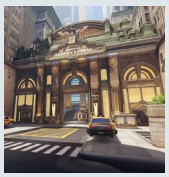
BLIZZARD IS IN THE MIDDLE OF A GRAND MERCY EXPERIMENT

The other big change Blizzard is trying out is with Moira. One of her abilities, an orb that slowly damages every enemy in its vicinity, has been replaced by a projectile orb that inflicts a powerful debuff on enemies. Necrotic Orb doesn't do much damage, but if you can tag an enemy with it, they'll be 'weakened', losing 75% of their damage output for the next four seconds. It's a hard ability to hit consistently, but use it at the right time and it's a big deal: powerful, sweeping ultimate combos like Ana's Nanocharge or Cassidy's Deadeye can have their damage instantly neutralised.

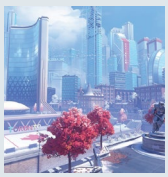
It's a far more impactful ability than Moira's old orb, but in turn, she has become a bit harder to pick up and play with. 'Harder to play, but more interesting' is becoming something of a trend with *Overwatch 2*'s new heroes and old hero changes. I'm curious to see what else will change before its release on October 4. ■

MAP QUEST

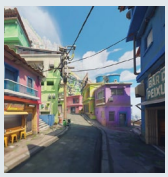
The new maps of the Overwatch 2 *beta*



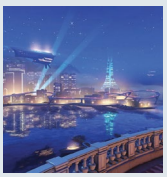
MIDTOWN
A Hybrid map that tours the slick, clean, and spacious streets of a New York City. So it's just about nothing like the actual place.



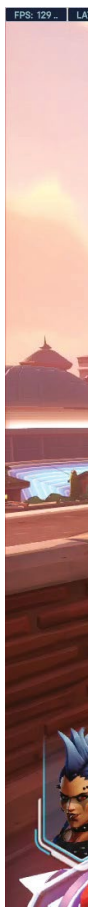
NEW QUEEN STREET
One of Overwatch 2's new Push maps. An idyllic, winding road through downtown Toronto in snow-kissed winter.



PARAÍSO
A Hybrid map that curves through neighbourhoods in the backdrop of Rio de Janeiro and culminates in an indoor Lucio concert.



CIRCUIT ROYAL
A pure Payload map inspired by a city that actually lets fast cars race down its streets every year: Monte Carlo, Monaco.



FAR LEFT: Mercy's latest super jump lets her instantly dash backwards, which saved me a few times.

BELOW: This is around the ideal range for Junker Queen's attacks. Close, but not too close.

TOP: Get used to shooting one bullet at a time.

ABOVE: Helpful but helpless scientists are worth talking to.

The shotgun. A classic.

DOOM RPG

A strange forgotten gem. *By Chris Livingston*

Brace yourself for a bizarre series of statements. There's an official *Doom* game that's a turn-based RPG yet still an FPS. It's a game that was designed and developed for mobile phones by id Software co-founder John Carmack in the era before smartphones became available. It's been essentially unavailable to buy or play for over a decade since the ancient phone hardware quickly became obsolete, so it's largely been forgotten. Also, it's... kinda awesome?

Doom RPG is one of those weird game concepts that sounds like it wouldn't work at all, but instead works amazingly well, and so it's doubly mystifying and tragic that it died so quickly and was never officially remade for other platforms. It's a real *Doom* game! Why would absolutely no effort be made to put it for sale on PC, the original home of *Doom*? Well, where developers and publishers utterly dropped the ball on *Doom RPG*, fans once again stepped in to save the game from a fate worse than death. The dedicated, genius hobbyists at GEC.inc have reverse engineered the source code for *Doom RPG* and created a PC port. Finally, at long last, you can play the weird but wonderful turn-based shooter right on your desktop. And you should. Right now. It's strange, but it's excellent.

It does take time to adjust to playing *Doom* as a fast-paced bullet hell FPS to a turn-based game. Instead of zooming and strafing through the levels, you tap an arrow key to move one step in the direction you're facing. You fire one shot, or one burst of bullets, at a time. When monsters appear it's hard to fight the deeply ingrained instinct to immediately move and shoot, but...

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
September 13, 2005

DEVELOPER
Fountainhead Entertainment

PUBLISHER
JAMDAT Mobile

LINK
doomworld.com

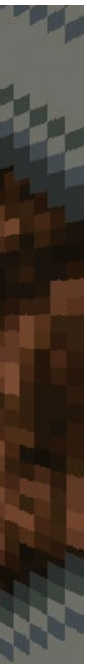
they'll wait their turn so there's really nothing to panic about. It's an odd feeling after so many years of *Doom* as a constant life-or-death struggle where a small miscalculation can leave you bloodied and desperate. Which isn't to say *Doom RPG* doesn't still get plenty tense.

FANS ONCE AGAIN STEPPED IN TO SAVE THE GAME

DOOM WITH A VIEW

But first, you mostly just walk around, one step at a time, inside a Martian UAC base. You are playing as the same DoomGuy you know and love, though you're called simply 'Marine' by the other characters. And yes, there are lots of people to talk to, by walking up to them, tapping the Enter key, and then scrolling through their dialogue. Scientists, soldiers and even civilians are everywhere in the base, and the tone of the conversations is very casual and friendly despite the fact that the base is also filled with hellish *Doom* monsters and large parts of the facility are on fire.

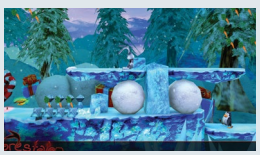
Everyone is worth talking to – characters often provide you with tutorial-like tips, like how to use a fire extinguisher to quell the flames and how to use a woodsman's axe (a weird thing to see in DoomGuy's hands) to break down doors and smash open supply crates. There are also the familiar colour-coded keys to



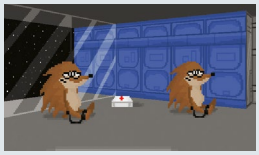
INNER DOOM

Some of the wildest Doom *mods*

LYCANTHORN
A gorgeous 3D *Castlevania*-like where you play as a werewolf with an enormous axe.



FORESTALE
A colourful 3D platformer where you're a rabbit speedrunning to save a forest.



SHADOW OF THE WOOL BALL
It is an FPS just like *Doom*, but you're a hedgehog fighting space kitties. Naturally.

ZOMBIES ATE MY NEIGHBORS
A remake of the LucasArts NES game as an FPS.

open blue, red, and yellow doors, but accessing the base is even more complex since some doors need specific codes you'll find in computer terminals. Those terminals are everywhere, and they're almost the best part of *Doom RPG*. They're filled with email communications between facility staff, and are often hilarious to read. One details an angry email exchange between two scientists, which is followed up by a final email reporting that they stopped typing and beat each other up. Another gives you a password of '1234' then points out what a terrible password it is. Even if *Doom RPG* didn't have monsters, I'd have a blast just wandering around reading about the inner lives and petty disputes of the people working at the base.

Doom RPG does have monsters, though. Lots and lots of familiar *Doom* demons lurk in the corridors and chambers of the base, and despite it being a turn-based affair they'll still pull some of their famous *Doom* tricks, like spawning in behind you, ambushing you when you open a door, and in the case of the Arch-Vile, using its turn to resurrect a monster you just killed with your turn. Yes, it's all turn-based, but big fights can still feel exciting and overwhelming at times, as monsters slip out of your narrow view of fire or get right up in your face and blast you as you wait your turn. They miss sometimes, which is honestly quite nice, as if you're frantically strafing around instead of standing still. And getting in the final shot on a Revenant or Pain Elemental as you're down to your final shreds of health is nearly as exciting as any fight from a traditional *Doom* game.

OFF BASE

The base is set up in segments, with a central hub connecting them – a safe area where you can walk around, buy supplies like ammo and health kits, and talk to characters between slugging it out in the progressively more difficult levels. Just like other *Doom* games there are tons of secret areas scattered throughout the base, walls that open when interacted with that reveal hidden chambers with power-ups and loot (and cash to spend at the vending machine in the hub), and at the end of each level you're treated to stats telling you how many secrets you found and how many you missed. There's an automap that will show you the layout if you've found the terminal that supplies you with map data, which can help you scour the level until you've accessed all the secrets. But even with a map, it's tricky finding them all.

And even after playing for a while, I kept forgetting it's, like, an RPG. But it is. You have an actual inventory beyond just your gun collection. When you gather enough XP by killing demons you level up and gain health and armour, and increase other attributes like agility and accuracy which determine how hard you are to hit and your damage. DoomGuy actually has a notebook for collecting door codes and other bits of useful information. Not only do I love *Doom* as an RPG, I'm starting to think I actually prefer it over the traditional *Doom* games.

And there are lots of little surprises. Two characters both insist they don't have a code I need to advance, and keep sending me back and forth between them until one asks for a cash bribe and then, abruptly, turns into a monster. In one delightful level, the code to a critical locked door is actually only visible on the map itself, as the corridors spell out 1337. Genius. With the pace slowed down enough to really examine and interact with the characters and terminals, there's tons of places to pack in clever writing and loads of humour. I became more concerned with finding every last bit of text than I was with opening secret doors to find shotgun shells.

TURN ON

And it's amazing how quickly moving through the *Doom* world step by step and getting into turn-based combat with monsters starts to feel perfectly normal. To kill a monster, you need to get it in your line of sight, and that's tricky because they sometimes use their turn to move sideways and out of the path of your gun. You can step closer or move over, but that may give them the chance to advance and attack. It's like a violent chess game as you try to limit your risk while positioning yourself to make your enemies vulnerable. It's always exciting, pumping a bullet at a time into a charging (well, moving closer one step at a time, anyway) Pinky as it growls and snarls toward you.

PLENTY OF STANDARD DOOM TACTICS ARE STILL VIABLE

And plenty of standard *Doom* tactics are still perfectly viable. Is a mob approaching you, or worse, are they using their turns to skitter away, back off, or stay out of your line of fire? Stepping into their path isn't always a great idea, because it may give them a free shot at you, but are there some barrels filled with toxic green goo nearby? Of course there are, this is *Doom* we're talking about. Just like in the other games, one shot will make that barrel explode, and if there are more barrels within range it'll set off a chain reaction.

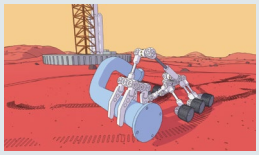
I love *Doom RPG*. The game's original files need to be modded to play on desktop, naturally, and let's just say buying a copy of the 2005 mobile game isn't exactly an option these days. I'm definitely not telling you to get those files somewhere without paying for them – that's certainly not advice I'd give you in print. But if they're out there somewhere, packed up with a nice utility that will quickly get the port unpacked, modded, and running on your desktop, I highly recommend it for any fan of *Doom*. ■

MARS DOESN'T ATTACK

Not every red planet trip ends in demons

TERRAFORMING MARS
Fail to colonise Mars and you'll be removed from office, but at least you won't be eaten by monsters.

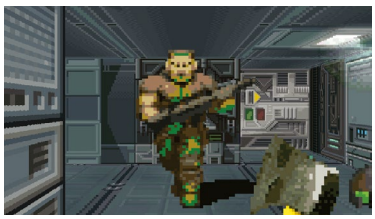
PER ASPERA
Turn the red planet green. No worries about an evil AI: you're the AI, and you can be trusted...



MARS FIRST LOGISTICS
No demons doesn't mean no work to do. Build some robots and keep them busy in this physics sim.

RED PLANET FARMING
Peacefully grow crops to feed your colonists in this charming and totally free game.

Can't dodge. Just gotta stand there and take it.



ABOVE: Darn Arch-Vile. I just killed that guy!

LEFT: The UAC base is just a bit on fire.

OK, who's idea was it to bring dogs to Mars?

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR NINE LIVES IN

STRAY

Find your way as a little cat in the big city. *By Lauren Aitken*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

TIME
2 hours

VITAL LINKS

Sheet music:
bit.ly/3RWppK9

Purple, yellow, and red plants:
bit.ly/3aYjEex

Energy drinks:
bit.ly/3BeW8Ew

CLIMB EVERYTHING

1 Climbable items will often be highlighted by orange lights hanging overhead, be orange-coloured, or have tassels, and climbing up every bin, wall, and AC unit will lead to finding new collectables, shortcuts, and robots to speak with.

SEARCH FOR MEMORIES

2 There are many memories to unlock that explain the robot city's history and how they all came to be. The more you explore, the more memories you'll find, revealing how civilisation fell and how B12 ended up stuck in a network loop.

INTERACT WITH EVERYTHING

3 You'll discover new quests and secrets if you interact with the environment. You can interrupt board games, mess up a pool game, knock paint from high walls, and discover new areas simply by meowing, talking to robots, and more.

CHIT CHAT

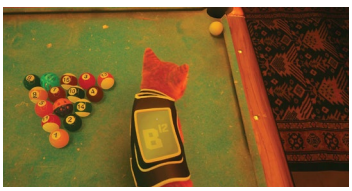
4 Most of the robots are friendly and have a lot to say – they'll often give hints about nearby issues or locations. They'll also give you quests essential for carrying on with the story, unique side quests to earn badges and some neat snippets of history.

SHOW AND TELL

5 As you discover new items, show them to B12 and the other robots you meet. You never know what secrets you'll uncover or whether a robot might need a particular item you have, like a poncho or a sheet of music.

CAT NAP

6 Taking a nap is essential cat behaviour and there are many areas where you can take a little siesta. If you need to take a break from *Stray*, let your kitty take a nap for an hour and you'll get a special achievement for doing so.



PLAYTIME

7 There are little activities you can get up to that will generally disrupt the robot's relaxation time, but are very fun cat behaviours. Knocking bottles over is fun, as is tripping up robots, but did you know you can dunk a basketball? That's right, kitty's like LeBron.

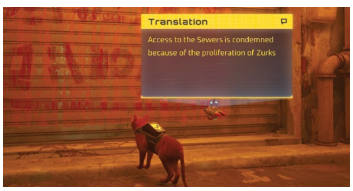
CAT-CHINE GUN *How to defeat the Zurks using the Defluxor*

MEOW CONSTANTLY

8 Not only will this net you an achievement if you meow over 100 times, it'll also attract attention from robots and illicit a reaction, such as shock or curiosity. It's also a good way to distract Zurks and Sentinels if you're in a tough spot.

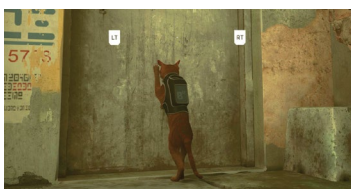
LOOK UP

9 Orange and red neon lights and lanterns often indicate a place of interest is nearby, usually linked to the main story. Make sure you climb up high and look up to spot these special locations, though they are often pretty tricky to reach.



PORTABLE PAL

10 When you're near an object or robot you can interact with, B12 will light up and display an icon. It's often easy to miss at certain angles, so look out for symbols appearing on your little cat jacket when he's stored away, or the prompt appearing on-screen.



SCRITCH SCRATCH

11 As well as being a nice bit of cat behaviour, if you scratch blinds and doors you'll often unlock a new route and might even discover a new area. You can only access the likes of Elliot and his big computer by scratching at his door, so watch out for the prompt.

ZURK AWARE

12 When in Zurk territory, use the observe function from a high location before you engage them in a chase. There are often alternative paths through the area and door locking systems you can use to trap them.

TOYING WITH THE INSECT INVASION IN

INTO THE BREACH: ADVANCED EDITION

Stop hitting yourself. *By Jon Bailes*

Nothing really matters all that much in *Into the Breach*. When you're fending off invasions of building-sized insects over infinite timelines, it's not the end of the world if you fail occasionally. Well, it's the end of that world, but there's always another dimension to hop across to and start things afresh, as if you hadn't just doomed billions to terrifying oblivion. With that in mind, it's only natural if your time-travelling pest controllers become desensitised to the consequences of their apocalyptic bug squishing and start to take it much less seriously.

On revisiting *Into the Breach*'s compact turn-based rumbles with its new Advanced Edition content, I began to feel a little like that too. Once I'd unlocked the five new squads available in this generous DLC serving, I wanted to muck about and toy with my six-legged adversaries a little. Straight-up shooting, bombing, or punching creep-crawly aliens in the face suddenly seemed rather tactless. So I set out to make headway using a squad built for less directly violent methods.

To be clear, though, this is no pacifist challenge. I still very much want the Vek swarms to come a cropper. But my mission is one of death by proxy, abusing the slow reactions and wits of these chitinous/gelatinous creatures so they unwittingly bumble into hazards or smash each other to bits. Honestly, it's almost sadistic, yet equally dangerous, since I can't call on the brute equivalent of a giant slipper to splat any bugs that escape my control.

APPLIANCE OF SCIENCE

First things first, I need a trio of robust mechs to send into the fray. Sticking solely to DLC units, I turn my attention to the science class bots, which generally favour less confrontational means of engaging the enemy. I'm surprised to discover then that of the five new flavours available, one causes direct damage while another sets targets on fire, slowly burning them to death, which is a trifle gauche for my liking.

The three science mechs I can use seem like a fun bunch though. There's Control Mech, which can sidle up to an opponent or ally, and move them up to two spaces to any empty spot. There's Exchange Mech, which can swap the positions of an adjacent unit with any other unit on the map. And there's Slide Mech, with the ability to pull surrounding units a single space in any direction. With these, my aim is to move the Vek around like reluctant chess pieces, so their planned attacks hurt them rather than me or any human-made structures. Now I simply need to rename my mechs. Following the science theme, Control Mech becomes Galileo, Exchange Mech is Newton, and Slide Mech is Copernicus. Go nerds!

As soon as I encounter the Vek on the first island, however, I realise there a few things I haven't considered.

THE RULES

1. No hitting enemies in a way that causes direct damage.
2. Use DLC units only – no relying on old favourites.
3. Complete all four islands before attempting the finale.

FIRST THINGS FIRST, I NEED A TRIO OF ROBUST MECHS TO SEND INTO THE FRAY

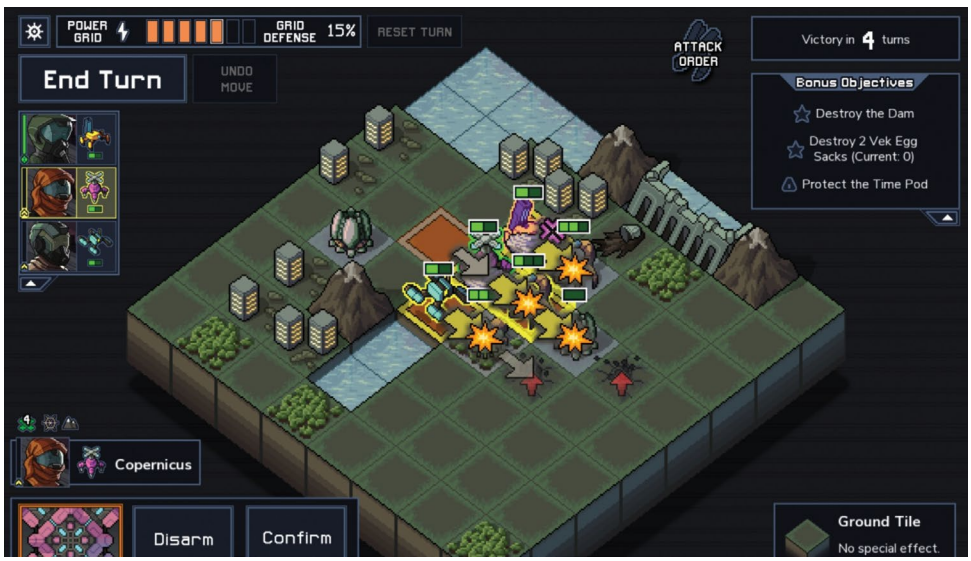
The initial grid I select has a bonus objective of destroying a dam, and with the dam tucked away on the right side, the Vek making a beeline for residential buildings on the opposite side, and me with no ranged weapons, that's a problem. Sure, such objectives aren't essential, but they are important, since they earn reputation points that I'll need to boost my abilities at the end of each island.

TEETHING TROUBLES

I also need to be careful how I use Copernicus. Sliding him straight into a static enemy, causing it (and myself) direct damage is a no-no, although sliding enemies into each other is surely fine. It's not my fault if one Vek happens to get in another's way, right? So I try to do that, while using Galileo to move a Vek into another's attack path and Newton to switch enemies about to attack upwards with ones about to attack sideways, so they stab at empty air.

Yet by the third turn in the opening mission, I'm in a pickle. My mechs are all caught in enemy webbing – I forgot this island has a lot of web spewers – which leads to a minor disaster. Two of my pilots are killed, leaving the mechs without their abilities. And it only gets worse from there. On the next mission I'm supposed to exterminate at least seven Vek, and only manage three. Plus the remainder manage to destroy some buildings, killing hundreds of people, which is bad for them but also me as it reduces my all-important power grid to only two bars. I do survive the mission, but I'm on the brink of defeat.

My third mission then sees me harangued by these new bugs called bouncers, which strike forward then slam into whatever's behind them. It's pretty funny when one kills itself by ricocheting into a spider egg, but I'm often struggling to find places to put them where they can't cause havoc. Before long I take more grid damage, and the run ends in embarrassingly short order. This is what happens when you rely on



science geeks to combat colossal insects. I feel like the gang deserves one more chance, though. While I suspect the slidey Copernicus might be a weak link, Gal and Newt are pretty versatile. This time I begin on a different island, the icy home of Pinnacle Robotics, to avoid early meetings with webbers and bouncers. I get off to a much better start, easily completing an objective to kill five or fewer enemies. It turns out, you see, that as much as I want to destroy the Vek, sometimes all I can manage is to move them to a space where they at least do no harm. Yes, it is a little disappointing.

TWO STEPS FORWARD

From that opening success, I take on a mission that sees my mechs covered in nasty Vek mites, which require me to receive damage or waste a turn healing to knock them off. That's followed by a map where I have to destroy a hacking facility to regain control of a killer robot, although of course once I do I'm not allowed to use it against the Vek. I get through both, and that brings me to a boss – a rubbery starfish thing. Its multi-directional attacks make it useful for smashing other Vek, but difficult to actually damage. I survive, but the five-limbed monstrosity exits without a scratch.

The second island beckons, and I select RST Corp's desert wilds for my next destination. The good news here is that there are plenty of deadly environmental hazards to exploit. Cracks in the ground turn into bottomless chasms, while a cataclysm event tears off a strip of the grid each turn, so I merely need to shove enemies into its path. Most straightforward of all though is a terraforming mission, where I use a big machine to mulch up chunks of land, taking out any Vek that happen to be standing in its path. I complete the island, and although I lose a pilot in the process, I'm rewarded with a new one for my efforts, so balance is restored.

Now I travel to Detritus Disposal's territory, famous for pools and vats of acid, which weakens the defences of units that get coated in the stuff. That's actually a bonus for me as it makes the Vek hurt each other harder, as long as I stay out of their line of fire. And while my power grid has got a little low, I'm causing more pain, particularly when one mission provides me with an acid disposal unit that can melt mountains or, should I choose, groups of enemies. Except, ah. I suddenly realise that counts as direct attacking, and then I remember the terraforming machine I used before, which blatantly broke the rules. Oops. Back to the drawing board.

WHAT THE VEK

Fear the DLC's new enemy units

GASTROPOD
Very large snails that reel you in while causing damage.

MOTH
Lobbers that recoil into whatever's behind them.

BOUNCER
These beefy bugs hit a target in front then rebound off it.

MOSQUITO
Covers you in smoke before biting you in the face.

STARFISH
Hits all four diagonal squares at once with slapping tentacles.

PSION
New variants include ones that turn baddies into eggs.

SECOND-HAND SMOKE

Still, I'm not too down, since I know I can do better, and my power grid was dangerously low anyway. For my third run, I replace Copernicus, who hasn't been pulling his weight, bringing in the non-sciencey Smog Mech, which lobs fireballs flanked by two smoke clouds. I won't be targeting enemies with flaming projectiles, but I can shoot next to them, so they choke on fumes, disrupting their attacks. I also want fresh names for this fresh attempt, and with the strong team I have, a sporting theme feels appropriate. Meet Beth Mead, Alexandra Popp, and Alessia Russo.

Like her namesake, Russo is an instant hit as an impact sub. I can now stop distant Vek from attacking by bathing them in smoke, then follow up with Popp's control ability to move another Vek into the squares I've set on fire. I can also torch spawn points, so new Vek immediately ignite as they emerge – if they're dumb enough to do that, not my problem. Better still, Russo's passive ability makes my mechs absorb smoke, so I can cover whole areas with the stuff without impeding myself. True, I'm still not killing loads of Vek, but I can't grumble when I reach the first boss with a full power grid, nor when I set the blobby leader alight then shift its minions around to finish it off.

BELOW: Science Mechs are the most fragile.

FIRST ISLAND DONE, I BOOST RUSSO'S EQUIPMENT SO HER SHOTS CREATE MORE SMOKE

First island done, I boost Russo's equipment so her shots create even more smoke, then head to Archive Inc, home of web monsters, with a swagger. And a few tricky bits aside – like a new mission type that forces the mechs to enter battle on just 1hp – I unstick myself from their grasp. Another mission introduces air strikes, which I decide I can take advantage of since I'm not in control of where they land, and throw a few insects into their path. I'm also enjoying placing my flying mech Popp over ocean tiles then using Mead to swap her with a weighty enemy, which helplessly plops into the depths.

By the time I hit Detritus isle I'm in full gear, and as I sandwich acid vats between bouncers or chuck fire into spaces where a charging beetle will arrive, this is unadulterated slapstick comedy. At one point I manage to arrange four Vek in a line, all hitting each other like the Three Stooges, and in a blink I'm advancing to the icy wastes of island four. The rogue robots here cause a few problems, and I lose Russo's pilot thanks to stupidly leaving her in two Veks' sights, but I escape with minor grid damage nonetheless.

That just leaves the finale, beginning in the presence of a convulsing volcano. I try to move Vek into the path of lava flows and flying fireballs, and by the last turn so many squares are covered in smoke or magma, there's not much they can do to stop me. It's a similar story with the last battle, where I need to protect a timebomb until it can purge the Vek nest. Falling rocks and killer tentacles are my friends as I swap and shift hapless bugs into their path and subdue the rest with volleys of smoke. Despite a little grid damage, victory is soon assured. The Vek barely know what hit them, and with a sly chuckle I can truthfully say it wasn't me. Not that it matters. ■

ABOVE: Robots can be more troublesome than Vek at times.

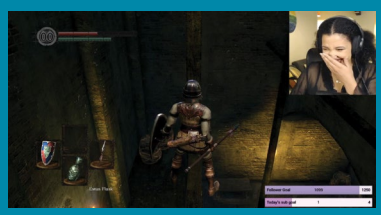
FAR LEFT: It's essential to take enemy turn order into account here.

LEFT: A high grid defence percentage stops some attacks getting through.

GOING LIVE

How streaming became my passion. *By Imogen Mellor*

LEFT: Behold, my humble beginnings.



I started my streaming adventure in May 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic. I had been furloughed, and as such couldn't write about games only six months into my first videogames industry role. I had all this passion for gaming, all these things I wanted to say and do around the hobby, but suddenly had no outlet to share them. I couldn't write about games, but maybe I could talk about them instead.

I, like many younger gaming fans, grew up watching a countless number of games played by internet personalities. As someone who didn't know how to edit a video, streaming seemed like the next sensible option, so that's what I started doing. I remember my nerves as if it was just yesterday. I made myself a pot of Yorkshire Tea, set down a pint of iced water, checked my hair and make-up, and pressed that little 'Go Live' button. And I've done a variation of that routine over 300 times these past two years.

My stream has changed time and time again. The equipment, my location, the background, my style, and the games have all changed, but what has never changed is that little hiccup of anticipation before I press that button. It's a tiny moment of excitement, even when I'm exhausted by other circumstances. A little constant thing in my life that I really love.

Streaming became a bit of a life line during lockdown. When I lived by myself for months at a time, it was the way I connected with people, and sometimes was the only time I'd talk in a day. There is a lot to be said both negative and positive for parasocial relationships, but when you build a streaming community and you learn about the lives of the people you chat to while playing games for them, it's a unique and thrilling experience.

WORTH 1,000 WORDS

When you're a streamer, good emotes are essential

FACE OFF
Faces are always a winner when it comes to emotes, especially when used in response to a streamers' actions.

ONE AND ONLY
Finding a unique take on emotes is encouraged. This one is an ugly interpretation of myself. It's hilarious.

SMALL BUT MIGHTY
Emotes are tiny when they're in chat so they have to be recognisable at any size. Even if they're terrifying.

LIVE LINE

Streaming has also cleared more of my gaming backlog than I would have by myself. *The Witcher 3*, *Dark Souls*, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, *Slay the Spire*, *Death Stranding*, *Final Fantasy VII Remake*, and more are all critically acclaimed games I probably wouldn't have made time for or thought were simply not for me. But with an audience who could hear what I liked and didn't like about games, they could faithfully recommend experiences to me. And by recommend I mean bully me into playing a game that gets scary sometimes because I can't stand horror. I've got to hand it to them, 90% of the time their recommendations are bang on the money – they know me well.

We all have bad days. Some 'bad days' can last weeks. But those bad days have often been alleviated by streaming. Sometimes I don't feel like going live, but I do it because it's a regular part of my life. I go live on certain days, at certain times. It's the sort of hobby that you do so much it's habit, and deviating from your regular routine feels odd. So even when I may be a little tired, or down, I press that live button and quite often worries melt away. It's funny that when you're so focused on entertaining a group of people, it can give you a few hours of peace from everything else.

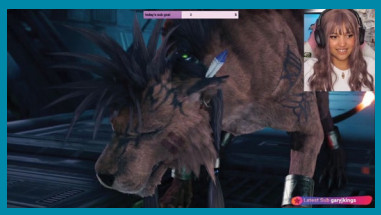
Pressing that live button also changes who I am. I get questioned sometimes about having an online persona, and anyone who streams will say that you're not exactly you when you're live, but you're at least a variation. For me, I'm by and large the same, just better. Funnier and more expressive. It's most comparable to doing a stand-up routine like a comedian – they're themselves, but they're on stage to be the most entertaining versions of themselves. And I've been able to take that part of myself and use it in everyday situations.

DREAM STREAM

Though not shy before I started streaming, I'm now a better conversationalist than I was. I'm a better entertainer, and can tell stories to an audience. And I think of myself as capable of more knowing I learned a new skill as an adult that I'd consider myself good at now.

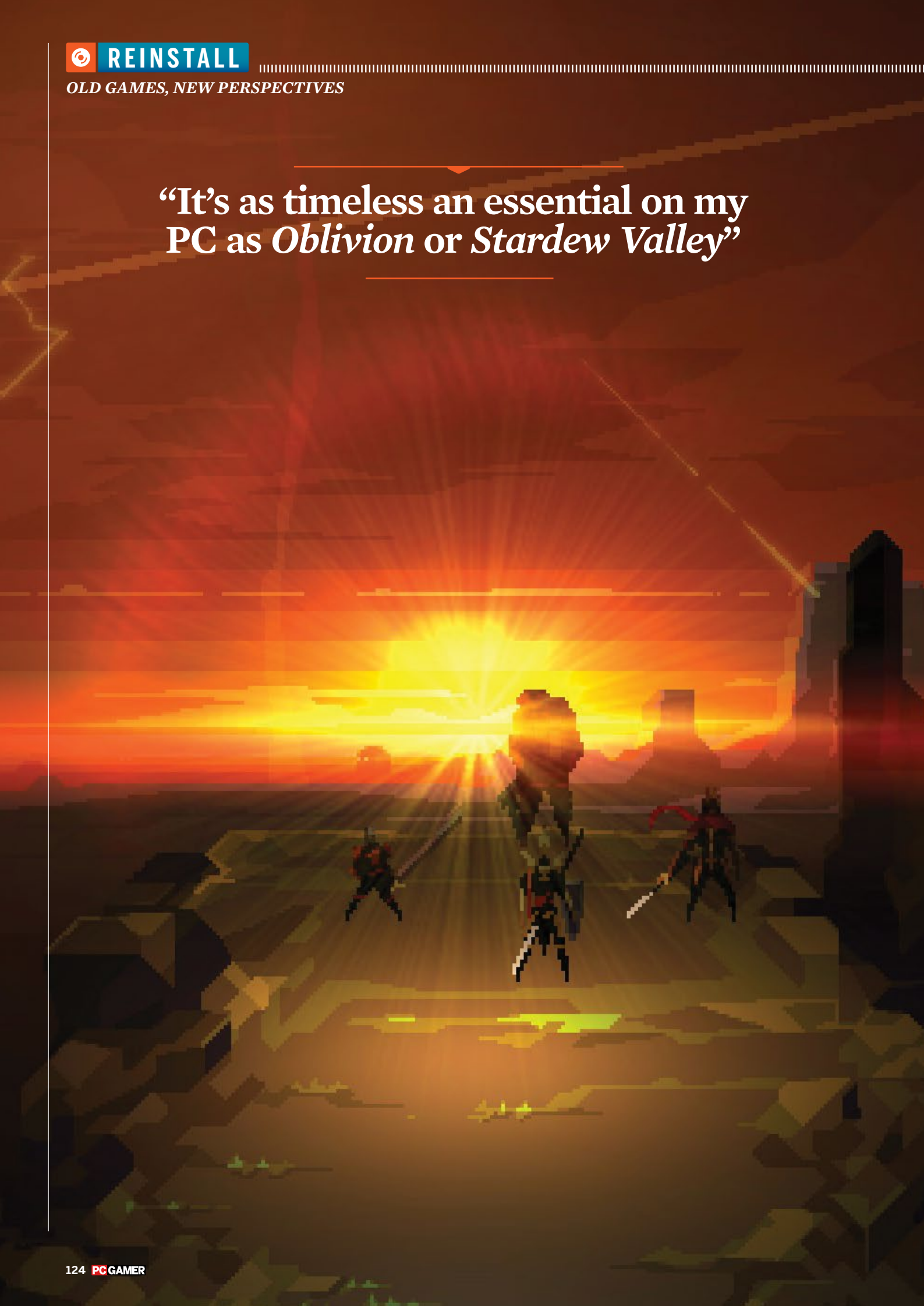
IT'S MOST COMPARABLE TO DOING A STAND-UP ROUTINE LIKE A COMEDIAN

Streaming has given me a lot to be thankful for. It's given me presenting experience, job opportunities, friends both real and online. It's given me conversations in bars where people sit up when they hear it's a hobby of mine. It's also hard work, and after racking up over 1,000 hours of airtime, I'm confident in what I've accomplished and know that if I ever want to pick up an entirely new skill again I can do it. I've got what it takes. And it all started with clicking a little 'Start Streaming' button. ■



RIGHT: This is where I'm at right now, but my stream will keep evolving from here.

"It's as timeless an essential on my PC as *Oblivion* or *Stardew Valley*"



DUNGEON OF THE ENDLESS

A simple but effective strategy game that's still my mainstay. *By Lauren Morton*

A strategy roguelite about escaping an alien-infested spaceship should not be relaxing, and yet I've always cultivated a *Solitaire*-like calm when playing *Dungeon of the Endless*. Amplitude Studios is, fairly, better known for its excellent 4X games: *Endless Legend*, *Endless Space*, and, of course, *Humankind*.

In between all its expansion and exploitation antics is this lesser known but no less excellent run-based strategy RPG from 2014. Amplitude is currently reimagining the space station escape game in upcoming tactical action game *Endless Dungeon*, a name more in line with other old hits, but even so it will always be *Dungeon of the Endless* that I routinely return to for a bit of strategic relaxation year after year after year.

Even when push comes to shove in the eternal battle for hard drive space, I've never betrayed *Dungeon of the Endless* with uninstallation. Odd of a choice in comfort game as it is, it's as timeless an essential on my PC as *Oblivion* or *Stardew Valley*. Even eight years on, I still go back every few months to play a couple floors of deadly spaceship escape.

SIMPLY STRATEGIC

The basic rules of *Dungeon of the Endless* are comfortably simple. You explore every floor of the space station room by room, looking for the exit to the next floor. The door to each new room of the floor may reveal gear, a new party member to recruit, or an entire crowd of monsters hellbent on destroying the ship's crystal you've got to protect.

TOP: With half the party dead, sometimes you're left sprinting to safety.

Opening each one acts like a turn, doling out rewards or consequences, after which I can decide on which door explore next.

Once you've managed to find the exit room, you'll need to have one character ferry that crystal from the beginning of the level to the end with aggressive aliens in tow. Combat happens in real-time, though you're only managing which room your characters are in, not their individual attacks.

Long ago in my first few runs, I passively gathered the other resources: food for healing and levelling characters, science for

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE 2014	**DEVELOPER** Amplitude Studios
PUBLISHER Sega	**LINK** amplitude-studios.com

unlocking new turret types, and industry for building them. As I unlocked different ships with their own constraints (the Infirmary Pod gives all heroes more health overall but won't auto-heal them at the end of every turn) I became more invested in flexing my strategic skills. Immediately running for the exit on early floors isn't the best call when I can continue opening doors, earning more resources for every generator I've built, to stock up for later levels.

It can be a quick process for the first few levels, opening doors, easily dispatching a group of enemies as they arrive, and then choosing which path to pursue next. The further I climb, the more I find myself deliberating between doors. Have I gone too far in one particular direction? Will the next door I open release a batch of baddies that finally kills one of my characters?

PERMADEATH PROBLEMS

Even on the lowest difficulty, which I've got no shame in playing and no desire to push myself beyond, permadeath is a constant threat. Keeping characters fighting together in the same room often keeps them safer in numbers against big hordes of increasingly dangerous aliens. But later levels force me to split them up with maps that radiate out from the starting room, inviting enemies on all sides that I need to protect that crucial crystal from.

EVERYTHING'S A PUZZLE

Real-time strategy bits aside, *Dungeon of the Endless*' lighting system makes it more a puzzle game at its heart. There's randomness involved: the shape of each level's interconnected rooms and which doors spawn monsters. By controlling the light in the level though, you're able to enforce a certain amount of control over the chaos.

Each room on the floor can be powered or dark, lit by the available 'dust' gathered by exploring rooms or by killing enemies. Lit rooms have to be contiguously connected though, and you've rarely got enough dust on hand to light every single new room you open. Dark rooms can't have turret weapons or defences deployed in them, and more importantly they have a chance to spawn monsters every time a new door opens.

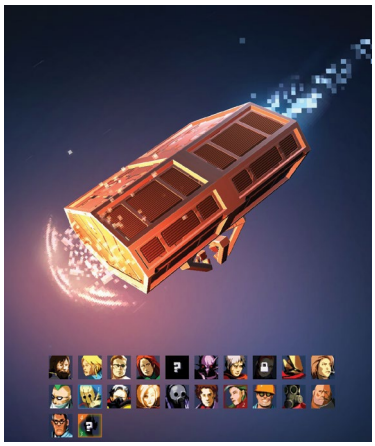
Keeping as many rooms lit as possible cuts down on the number of monsters assaulting your party each round, but which rooms are lit is even more important than how many.

ABOVE: On early floors, your team makes short work of enemies.

MY MARE LADY

Go-to horse girl hero Joleri

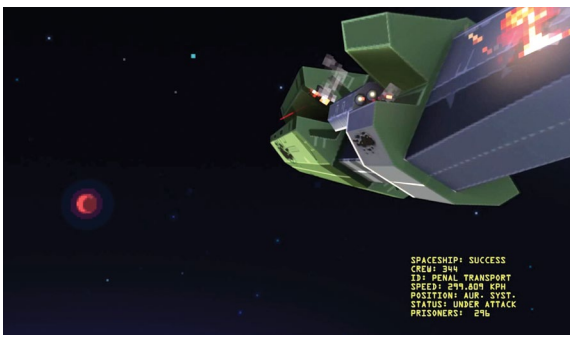
Lady Joleri Tulak was apparently trapped in the dungeon after beasts ate her horse, who she's determined to avenge. I swear that's not why I use her in every run though. It's because she's speedy with tons of DPS.

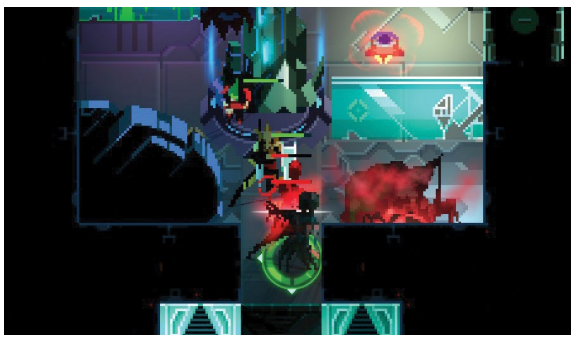


It all starts with a crash landing.

ABOVE: Each escape pod has its own rules.

FAR RIGHT: There's no shortage of RPG stats either.





I delight in poring over the level map before opening each new door. Keeping a corridor lit up after I've fully explored it means covering my back, and the crystal, from monster attacks even though it may force my party to push forward into the darkness and face hordes head-on.

As dust gets scarce in later levels, I have to make more dire choices. Rooms with a hero standing in them, even if unpowered, also won't spawn new monsters. In more tense moments, my characters with a higher speed rating get relegated to dark rooms I can't afford to power, a last-ditch preventative measure that means they'll need to book it through several rooms to back up their pals when the next door inevitably reveals new enemies.

In those most dangerous moments, there's an alluring tension to every door opening: the beep and hiss of pixelated hydraulics slowly rolling open over two seconds that feel like twenty. Like wincing during a critical dice roll, opening a high floor door will either let me breathe a sigh of relief when I've finally revealed the exit, or a sharp curse and slam on the pause button while I decide how to handle aliens advancing from three different directions.

I DELIGHT IN PORING OVER THE LEVEL MAP BEFORE OPENING EACH NEW DOOR

It's even instilled in me the superstitions of a puzzle game player. Every rectangular room has between one and four doors, which I habitually explore in a straight line whenever possible before working back to offshoots, which should always be opened clockwise starting from the left. There's not a shred of theory behind that tactical choice, not that I know of, but I feel absolutely convinced that left and then clockwise never leads me astray.

MEDITATIVE CHAOS

That mix of patterns, habits and slow but steady progress is what makes *Dungeon of the Endless* so reliably soothing for me. Like a *Minesweeper* board or daily *Wordle*, the intersection of randomisation and strategy is calming. The indirect combat doesn't hurt either.

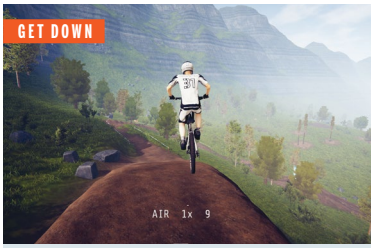
It would be easy to write off *Dungeon of the Endless* as a weird experiment between Amplitude's more popular 4X games. Compared with the complexity of those big strategy hits I've just never jelled with, *Dungeon of the Endless* is compact and effective. Held up against the roguelike wave following in the tear-stained footsteps of *Binding of Isaac* and others, it has the less frantic pace I crave without sacrificing those edge of my seat moments of success snatched from the jaws of failure.

With *Endless Dungeon* introducing more active, action-RPG-style combat when it launches, I expect I'll be even more endeared to the original than before. The sequel looks like it will be carrying forward the core concepts of the studio's original roguelite: defending your crystal with turrets and gadgets from waves of monsters and the importance of team composition. I'm totally down for *Endless Dungeon*'s slicker 3D style, space Western vibes, and hands-on combat. But I feel confident that *Dungeon of the Endless* will still keep a privileged spot in my library.

After eight years of occasional rounds and slowly chipping away at achievements, *Dungeon of the Endless* is a prime target for reinstallation – or just never uninstalling in the first place. ■

TYLER WILDE

I came up with this list by closing my eyes and thinking of summer. Unfortunately, I wound up thinking about the summer I was bullied at camp.



DESCENDERS

descendersgame.com

I see people biking through the coastal hills here in California, zipping around blind corners while drivers in Corvettes pretend they're playing *Crusin' USA*, and I think: I don't want to do that. I'll stick to a safe sport, boxing, and get my downhill biking thrills with *Descenders*.

OPUS MAGNUM

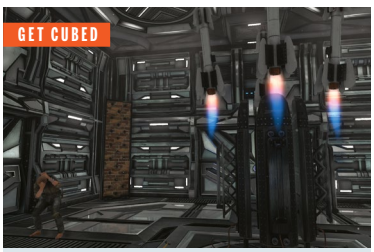
zachtronics.com/opus-magnum

Opus Magnum is my favourite game from puzzle game maker Zachtronics. It's about designing alchemy machines that work more efficiently than your friends' alchemy machines so you can usurp their leaderboard positions. That's just the kind of petty competitiveness I like.

DIVINITY: DRAGON COMMANDER

divinitydragoncommander.com

Before *Divinity: Original Sin* and its sequel, Larian made this weird turn-based diplomacy and real-time strategy game. In the middle of a battle, you can transform into a dragon with a jetpack (cooler than a dragon without one) and personally raze the enemy army.



HALF-DEAD 2

bit.ly/2Tfnj8A

'Must Play' might be a bit strong for this one, but we don't have a column called 'Can Play'. This is a janky co-op game that's basically the movie Cube (or its sequel, Cube 2: Hypercube). It requires friends on Discord to be fun. Your goofiest friends, specifically.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST OF THE BEST GAMES YOU CAN PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Tyler Wilde

YANKAI'S TRIANGLE

yankaistriangle.com

Welcome to the triangle dimension. In the triangle dimension, you must make all the triangles triangle together, triangularly. It's simple: there are small triangles. The small triangles form large triangles. The large triangles form larger triangles. Just triangle 'em up!

DEVIL DAGGERS

bit.ly/20egcuN

Devil Daggers takes the life and death repetition of roguelikes to the extreme. New players might only last for a few seconds. One minute of daggering devils is pretty good. Five and a half minutes would put you among the top 5,000 players. The world record? Just 20 minutes.

ABSOLUTE DRIFT

absolutedrift.com

The first time I hit a loading screen in this game, it pointed out that I was crashing a lot, which was pretty hurtful. But it also gave me some advice, which was to slow down and focus on control. This is a good game to play when you need to be reminded of that.

ELDEN RING

eldenring.com

Have you heard of this game called *Elden Ring*? Some of my friends played it a few months ago and came away saying it was pretty damn good. I haven't really played it much, but it seems cool. Just thought I'd let you know about it. This is my character, Grout.

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STEVE

Owner: Lauren Aitken, Deputy Guides Editor

Score: 10/10

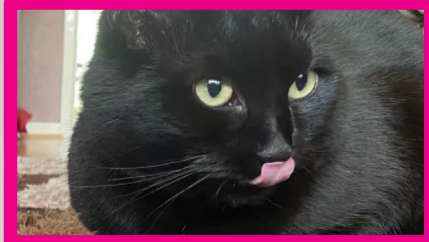
"Finally a videogame with a good looking protagonist."

FRED & BARNEY

Owner: John Strike, Art Editor

Score: 3/10

"So bad we almost threw up the cat poo we ate this morning."



LUNA

Owner: Mollie Taylor, News Writer

Score: 1/10

"I'm expected to like another cat getting all the attention?"

MIKA

Owner: Jody Macgregor, Weekend Editor

Score: 9/10

"Finally, a cat that doesn't claw me in the nose when I sniff it!"

PET PROJECT

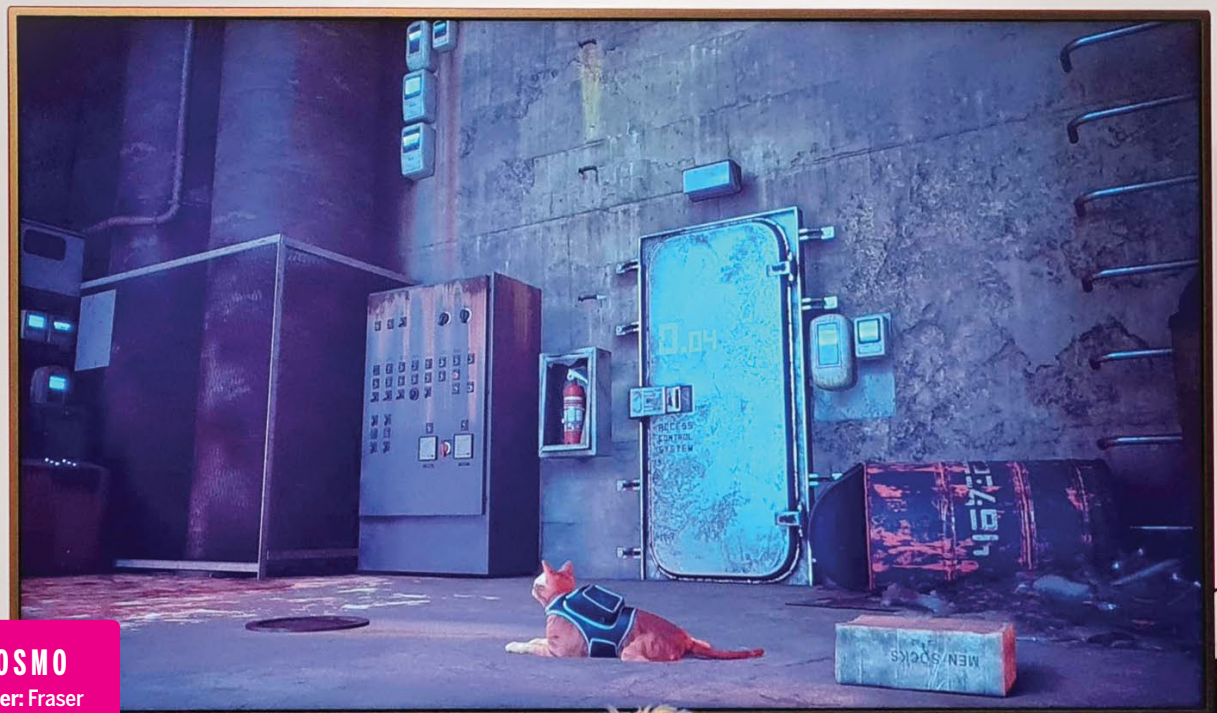
PC Gamer's furry friends weigh in on **STRAY**

BOO

Owner: Phil Savage, UK Editor-in-Chief

Score: ?/10

[Could not be reached for comment. She's in the vents. Pray for us. -Ed]



COSMO

Owner: Fraser Brown, Online Editor

Score: 8/10

"I like to watch the orange boy. I would like to eat the orange boy."

...UNTIL **SEPT 15**

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PC GAMER
TOP
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TOP 100 2022

"THE GAMES WE MOST RECOMMEND PLAYING IN 2022"

ROBIN VALENTINE
Specialist in
Herding writers
Twitter
@robinlvalentine
This month
Earned a few more grey hairs in our lengthy deliberation meetings. I call them my battle scars.

The thing I love about putting the Top 100 together each year is that it's such a good reminder of why we do what we do. All these brilliant games at your fingertips – these are the experiences that compel us to write a magazine and you to (hopefully) read it.

But remember: this isn't a list of the best games of all time, or the most important, just the ones we most recommend playing in 2022. That means a few retro classics that hold up, but also lots of brilliant recent releases that reflect the modern landscape.

So read on, and find a few new games to add to your wishlist. You may just fall in love with them as much as we did.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR
robin.valentine@futurenet.com

TALK TO PC GAMER
Have your say! Email us at letters@pcgamer.com

PERSONAL PICK

Mollie Taylor

HATSUNE MIKU PROJECT DIVA MEGAMIX+

The best rhythm game series finally came to PC. Easy to learn yet difficult to master, your thumbs will be sweating as they frantically dance across a massive library of computerised Japanese beats. Vocaloid isn't everyone's cup of tea, but it's catchy as all hell.

PERSONAL PICK

Nat Clayton

SABLE

Sable isn't a game about action, adventure, or saving the world. Instead, your journey across its pastel world is a warm hug of self-discovery: ascend mountains for the sake of it, try on new faces, meet people, and glide on your jetbike to the relaxing sounds of Japanese Breakfast.

100 ZERO ESCAPE: THE NONARY GAMES

RELEASED 2007 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Jody: Puzzle dungeon visual novels of the "you wake in a room" variety, the *Zero Escape* games burst with gory deaths and narrow getaways. Nine people get trapped in mazes as twisty as the games' jumbles of esoterica and hidden histories.
Phil: Satisfying puzzles and philosophical paradoxes, through an anime filter. It keeps you guessing as you navigate the timeline, unpicking a grand mystery.
Mollie: I'm still reeling from Virtue's *Last Reward* years later. What a goddamn trip.

99 SHADOWRUN: HONG KONG

RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

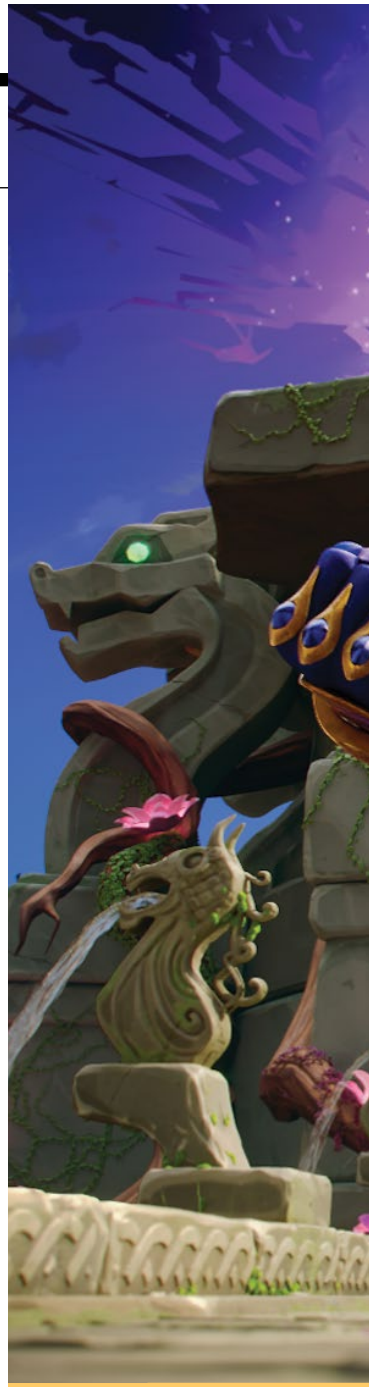
Jody: One recruitable companion in this cyberpunk-fantasy RPG is a Japanese ghoul samurai. Bringing him along on heists and infiltrations means fast-talking guards and civilians to convince them he's an actor or a cosplayer. Your whole crew is made of misfits, including a rat-spirit shaman who treats garbage like gourmet.
Robin: The excellent *Shadowrun: Dragonfall* has been in our list for a few years now, but I definitely prefer Hong Kong for its brilliantly evocative setting.

98 SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

RELEASED 2003 | **LAST POSITION** 95

Lauren M: *Shadow Tactics* is the immaculate tactical stealth success that proved Mimimi Games had the chops to take up the *Desperados* series. Every mission is a lovely puzzle, and there's an immense joy in meticulously setting up a simultaneous kill using all my party.
Phil: One of the most rewarding stealth games of recent years, embracing the unforgiving attitude of the genre but modernising it where it counts. The real pleasure here is being dropped into large maps full of guards, and slowly picking apart the puzzle of their intricate patrol routes as you work your way through. Your motley crew brings a variety of ways to distract, dispatch and disappear your foes, and it's these asynchronous abilities that make the difficulty so satisfying to overcome. Some are nimble, able to navigate rooftops and tricky terrain. Others are stuck to the ground, but bring traps and tricks to help clear a path.

Shadow Mode, which lets you queue up moves for your team to execute at the same time, is inherently cool, as you painstakingly plan multiple takedowns, hit a button, and watch the action play out.



T100 2022

97 TEAMFIGHT TACTICS

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Fraser: One of the last autobattlers left standing – the product of a short-lived trend that no doubt benefited from sharing a launcher with the rubbish but immensely popular *League of Legends*. I love the constant reinvention of characters and mechanics, and building my loadout of heroes mid-battle, but the real appeal is how easy it is to just hang out and shoot the shit with friends while my diligent little warriors duke it out or die.

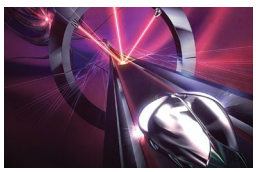
96 THE FORGOTTEN CITY

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Jody: Groundhog Day with gladiators. There's only one gladiator, but you get the point. You're in a time loop, reliving a single day in ancient Rome.

Time loop games seem like a great idea, but it turns out redoing the same thing even more than videogames usually demand is actually super frustrating. *The Forgotten City* gets around that with two inventions: an arguably anachronistic zipline, and a sensible human being. The wonderful Galerius greets you each day, and when you barrel up to him shouting instructions to save the lives of people you figured out how to save in the previous loop, he just gets on with it. Gordian knot elegantly cut.

That knot was Greek, but you still get the idea.



95 THUMPER

RELEASED 2016 | **LAST POSITION** Re-entry

Nat: Once, in Berlin, I played an early build of *Thumper* so hard my thumbs bled. Deep, violent bass throbbing through my skull, an assault of neon violets burning my eyes, desperately trying not to shed blood all over a shared gamepad, I embodied Thumper in its entirety – a pure rhythm hell where you stop looking at the beats coming down the track, and start feeling the rhythm pounding through your body.

Jody: You're a god-killing space beetle. What could be more immaculate?

TOP 100 2022

94 TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016 | **LAST POSITION** 88 ▼

Nat: Last year, *Titanfall 2* was basically dead. While that campaign is still solid as hell, DDoS attacks had rendered multiplayer servers largely unplayable. But in December, *Titanfall 2* got a Christmas pressie in the form of Northstar – a fan-run server browser that shot new lift into the knackered old mech.

In 2022, *Titanfall 2* isn't just playable. It's thriving. While early builds only allowed for certain modes on certain maps, Northstar is now a wonderfully chaotic mess of custom gametypes and modded mechs, the best of which sees BT literally throw you into the start of each new round. It's a throwback to the good ol' server browser days, and a perfect place for *Titanfall 2* to spend its long-overdue retirement.

93 FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010 | **LAST POSITION** 87 ▼

Jody: New Vegas blends the strengths of Fallouts old and new. It's got some of the originals' problem-solving variety, letting you talk round a fascist legionnaire or a brain in a jar, and the 3D world and VATS combat of modern Fallout, with the pleasant ding of XP earned and the foreboding rumble of new quests begun.
Imogen: Can't believe we don't have rules against games that require a library of mods to work well.
Jody: Three mods isn't a library!
Nat: Janky, ugly, rubbish.
Chris L: Bethesda plus Obsidian, yeah, you're gonna get tons of jank. But for an RPG I've already played multiple times I could dive back in today and have a wholly different experience with consequences and choices I've never encountered before.

92 COMMAND & CONQUER REMASTERED COLLECTION

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Phil: Two classic RTSes in one loving package makes this an easy recommendation despite the age of its source material. Red Alert, in particular, is practically timeless – an alternate history World War II where Einstein travels back in time to assassinate Hitler. The result is much as you'd expect: campy FMV cutscenes, a pumping industrial soundtrack, and the deadly thrum of Tesla Coils as they prepare to decimate your army. Still a joy to play.

91 INSIDE

RELEASED 2016 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Rich: Inside may be bringing up the rear in this list but it's one of the best experiences I've had in gaming. A contemporary re-casting of the Frankenstein myth, the environments are a near-seamless blend of clever puzzles and bleak suggestion about where you are. Horror, sci-fi, and for my money the best twist in games.
Sean: Inside is the perfect narrative sidescroller: it's got atmosphere, a moody soundtrack, smart puzzles, and most important of all: tension. As you pilot the boy through rainswept ruins and enslaved cities towards whatever end, Inside does that rarest of things, making you consider the act of playing the game itself.
Nat: *Inside* is a game you only play once. But that one time is a masterclass in mood, in building up tension and dread as you push a small child further into a brutalist meat grinder. It's playing in almost the exact same space as Limbo, a trial-and-error platformer more than a real puzzler, but the artistry on display is phenomenal, woods and barns and deeper, darker industrial places all painted in a dreary watercolour greyscale that pushes you towards hopelessness.
Robin: Has to be said, it's got one of the best endings of any game. If it's not been spoiled for you yet, then oh boy are you in for a treat.

90 SNOWRUNNER

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** 80

Morgan: *Snowrunner* is the best game about driving trucks through mud ever made. Not that it has much competition, but this is one sim you should really try for yourself. Jobs are various versions of "deliver X to Y," but they're really just reasons to have fun carving a path through natural hazards. It also sports some of the best physics-based suspension and land deformation tech around. It dropped a few places this year, but Snowrunner is still an easy recommendation.

89 HOMEWORLD REMASTERED

RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** 78

Nat: Homeworld is PC gaming's great space opera. A majestic, galaxy-spanning drama played out in a way only games could manage—by way of a perfectly executed three-dimensional spacefaring RTS. Gearbox did a hell of a job remastering the games to not only look gorgeous, but play with a little less '90s faff, and a thriving mod scene means Homeworld also doubles as a phenomenal RTS adaptation of Star Wars, Star Trek, Halo, Mass Effect and more.

88 TEKKEN 7

RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** 74

Mollie: Bombastic, crisp combat and an electrifying soundtrack keep me coming back to *Tekken 7*. I still can't find another fighting game that's this much fun to watch and play. It has a steeper learning curve than some, but it's totally worth it. The dramatic slow-mo cam that inches in on the final punchup should be in every fighter!

87 METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

RELEASED September 1, 2015
LAST POSITION 71

Morgan: This seven-year-old open-world stealth gem is starting to show its age, but the best bits of Metal Gear Solid V are still some of the best moments in the genre. Even the best immersive sims struggle to match The *Phantom Pain*'s freeform approach to missions and huge variety of tools.

86 FROSTPUNK

RELEASED 2018
LAST POSITION 71

Sean: In the often warm and cosy city-builder genre, *Frostpunk* is a shard of ice. You're not an omnipotent eye in the sky governing a faceless population; as you balance sacrifice and survival in a snow-strewn apocalypse, *Frostpunk* forces you to face the people, and ultimately be held extremely accountable.

TOP 100 2022

85 ALIEN ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014 | **LAST POSITION** 83

Jody: A cinephile's dream, recreating the look and sound of Alien with loving care. It's also a nightmare, recreating the xenomorph from gurgling growl to lashing tail and letting it loose to stalk you through (lovingly recreated) space station corridors.

If someone's not into strategy games I don't feel guilty convincing them to play one. When people aren't into horror, it's usually with good reason. If you don't like being afraid you won't like Alien Isolation. It's terrifying. That said, if you enjoy the relief of triumphing over a boss in a Souls-like, think how relieved you'd feel confronting actual fear rather than some guy who transforms into a thing with long arms.

84 CONTROL

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Robin: The vibes are just impeccable. If you could distill *Control*'s weird, SCP-inspired atmosphere into a liquid, I'd drink a gallon. I love how much fun it is to move and fight through its bizarre, impossible spaces while soaking all that in.

Fraser: It's brutalist architecture porn. And as striking as it is, boy does it have a glow up when you turn on ray-tracing. There are a lot of flat, reflective surfaces in the Oldest House, so it's a great showcase of those fancy reflections.

83 SATISFACTORY

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 50

Wes: In *Satisfactory* we built a power plant tower so tall you could see it from across the planet. We built factories with so many glass windows that even an RTX 3080 gave up on rendering them all. We connected conveyor belts carrying precious resources across the desert to a cargo train that spiralled up the side of a mountain. We built a mining facility so far away it needed aerial drones to collect its materials – even though we couldn't actually build drones yet.

Satisfactory begins as a game about optimisation, finding the most efficient ways to pump out resources. Master that, and you're left with a sandbox that rewards you for building however and wherever the hell you want, just for the satisfaction of it.

82 RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 43

Jody: *Resident Evil* at its most decadent and gothic. There's a bit with a baby in a puppet house that's as scary as the series has ever been, a werewolf attack in the village that pays homage to *Resident Evil 4*'s early siege, and the vampire-haunted Castle Dimitrescu, which lives up to its reputation. Playing *RE8* a while after release, I didn't think Lady D could possibly be as cool as the hype around her suggested, but she absolutely was. And there are plenty of surprises after that, with plot twists I wasn't expecting, neat references to older games in the series, and a Mercenaries mode that's basically bullet heaven. The puzzle with the sinking platforms on the lake is rubbish, though.

Jacob: If you're a new player looking for a good entry point into the *Resident Evil* series, *Village* is it. It's more run and gun than previous entries, but since it's a modern vision of *Resident Evil* it's not short of variety to keep gameplay interesting. You visit heaps of beautifully designed levels throughout the game, and each one offers a taste of everything *Resident Evil* has done well over the years. The story follows on from *Resident Evil 7*, so you may find you want to start there before hitting up Village, but it does a pretty good job of explaining what's going on.

81 COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

RELEASED 2012 | **LAST POSITION** 37

Rich: As *CS:GO*'s Twitter bio says, this is "your favourite first person shooter's favourite first person shooter". Still attracting almost a million daily players, the biggest esport around, the best 5vs5 tactical shooter – and despite what some say, it still gets intermittent updates.

Evan: It's still the purest competitive FPS on PC, but waning in importance as the tail of battle royale and extraction shooters lengthens. I love *CS*, but I'd rather play *Hunt: Showdown* in 2022.

80 COMPANY OF HEROES 2

RELEASED 2013 | **LAST POSITION** 65

Fraser: There's understandably still a great deal of fondness for the original *Company of Heroes*, but with 2 the multiplayer really got to shine, leading to a much longer tail. And, honestly, I've had enough of the invasion of Normandy. The campaign has a lot to recommend it, too, if you don't mind the Russian cold, and is further elevated by the impressive non-linear *Ardennes Assault* expansion, paving the way for the impending *Company of Heroes 3* and its dynamic campaign.

PERSONAL PICK

Sarah James

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

WOW hasn't had the best year but I can't help it – it's still my favourite MMO. Most of its troubles have been with overly-complex endgame power systems, but there's still nearly 18 years of content to explore, along with lore that spans back to the earlier games.

PERSONAL PICK

Sean Martin

RAINWORLD

Everything in Rainworld tries to eat you and I kind of love that. The only tools the Slugcat has to survive these dystopian predators are your smarts, and that makes it both the weakest and the most deadly creature in the entire ecosystem. Also you can tame the lizards.

79 PSYCHONAUTS 2

RELEASED 2021
LAST POSITION New entry

Morgan: *Psychonauts 2* is what happens when the brilliant folks at Double Fine get as much time and budget as they need to make a 3D platformer. This is a gorgeous sequel that picks up right where the first left off. A charming, heart-wrenching story through the lens of a 2005 collectathon platform game.

78 ANNO 1800

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 62 ▼

Phil: A city-builder about creating elaborate, automated production chains – ferrying myriad resources from across the world to turn into the goods your citizens crave. The cities you create will be ornate and beautiful, but the real joy is found in watching a successful, stable supply of sewing machines leave your heaving factories.

77 RIMWORLD

RELEASED 2013 | **LAST POSITION** New

Evan: Perhaps the best raw, customisable storytelling engine on this list, *RimWorld* is the progeny of hyper-granular colony sims like *Dwarf Fortress*. Your pet turkey can break bones (or lose their beak to frostbite in the winter after a specific level of cold exposure). It's also moddable as hell: I played 125 hours this year with a multiplayer add-on.

76 ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013 | **LAST POSITION** 69 ▼

Evan: The launch of the Early Access *Arma Reforger* in May complicates this a bit: *Arma* is improving on its path to *Arma 4*, but slowly. For now, *Arma 3* is still my recommendation for a feature-complete military sandbox. The game continues to remind us that scale is one of the precious feelings games can give us. That doesn't just mean "big maps". Scale is as much about the absolute freedom players have to be a part of epic firefights in different, interconnected ways.

75 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED 2011 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Robin: I can't believe this is still on here. Both we and Bethesda need to let it go already.
Jody: I get it. I'd be tempted to replay Morrowind if I wanted a full playthrough of an *Elder Scrolls* RPG, yet I keep *Skyrim* installed and go back to look at mods. I've recently explored a cyberpunk city and begun a multi-part quest with fully voiced followers. *Skyrim*'s alive, and people are doing more interesting things to it than most newer games.

74 PHASMOPHOBIA

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Lauren Morton: How does one bond with friends if not by stomping around a haunted house and wailing increasingly awful "where are you?" Blink-182 impressions at angry ghosts?
Jacob: I used to jump into *Phasmophobia* expecting to be terrified almost immediately, now I do it because it's a great social game to play with a handful of friends. Enjoying a stroll through an abandoned and potentially haunted campsite or prison is now my idea of a good time, just shooting the breeze and poking fun as we idly check for ghosts on our vast array of ghost hunting gear.

I love those moments simply tracking spectres much that I've actually explored haunted castles (or those claiming to be haunted) with friends in real-life because of it. *Phasmophobia* made me realise I love the quirky ghost-hunting culture that I thought only existed in episodes of early 2000s British TV show Most Haunted; a world filled with EMF meters, spirit boxes, infrared thermometers, and 'I'd rather be ghost hunting' caps.
Rich: I return to *Phasmophobia* every few months with the same group, because it's always different. Yeah we've seen much of what the game has but its combinations, its capacity to shock you out of over-confidence, remains undimmed.

TOP 100 2022

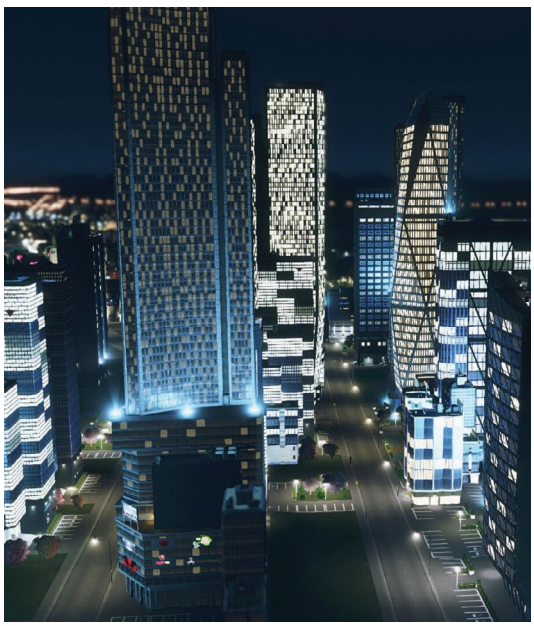
73 VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES

RELEASED 2004 | **LAST POSITION** 93 ▲

Jody: *Bloodlines* remains an unbeatable example of a specific kind of RPG: one with sexy vampires you can kiss. It's got atmospheric urban hubs to explore, wonderfully animated NPCs, and a sudden switch to full horror that scared me shitless even on playthrough three.

The Unofficial Patch continues being updated long after fixing *Bloodlines*' biggest bugs. It even inserts shortcuts past combat-heavy areas, the main weak spot of a game otherwise happy to let you sneak, talk, or kiss your way out of problems.

Actually, I think kissing caused more problems than it solved.

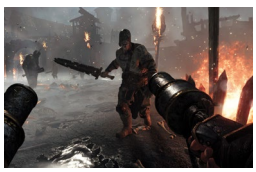


72 CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Katie: Seven years is a long time for any game to stay relevant, but *Cities: Skylines* remains the (big) apple of my eye as one of the greatest city builders of all time. It's not moved in the top 100 list as we consider it truly representative of the genre, the pinnacle of traffic management and a well rounded city design sandbox.

The game's easy to pick up, and deep strategies reveal themselves as you learn to manage traffic flow, master road hierarchy, and exert your authority with evil cycle-to-work schemes. The fact there are still tons of active modders in the community today, and that Paradox is still releasing DLC packs, means there's a constant stream of content to keep you amused until they finally grace us with *Cities: Skylines 2*.



71 WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** 77 ▲

Sean: Vermintide 2 is the most down-to-earth Warhammer game. It's essentially about five roommates trying to deal with the end of the world. They drink together, bicker together, and yes, slaughter an endless number of humanoid rats together. In a setting rife with OP gods and champions, I love that it's about a bunch of misfits just trying their best.

Robin: It's got that wonderful humour and satire in the dialogue, but always against this absurdly grim, violent backdrop.

PERSONAL PICK

Dave James

OXENFREE

An always engaging surprise of an indie adventure game that draws you in with its dialogue and innate weirdness and will keep hold of you until the end. Whichever one you end up with. *Oxenfree*'s simplicity means that it holds up as well today as it did when it released six years ago.

PERSONAL PICK

Katie Wickens

THE STANLEY PARABLE

There's a distinct lack of walking simulators on this list, which is kind of depressing. *The Stanley Parable* is one of the finest examples of branching narrative, and explores the concepts of free will and determinism in such an accessible way, it's hard to beat.

70 FARMING SIMULATOR 22

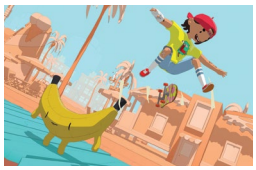
RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Chris: For years I wondered what the appeal of a hardcore farming sim was, but then I spent a couple seasons ploughing, planting, cultivating, growing and harvesting. When my first crop of beets began pouring into my trailer – and I am not being sarcastic here – it was a genuine rush. The deep complexity of the systems and the exquisitely recreated farming vehicles, which to my mind are just as impressive as sci-fi spaceships, make it easy to turn farming into an obsession.

69 OLLIOLLI WORLD

RELEASED 2022 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Robin: I genuinely had to uninstall this to make myself stop playing it, because I was in so deep I could feel it giving me RSI.
Dave: I fell in love with this game while I was reviewing the Steam Deck. It's the perfect pick up and play game for a handheld. It reminds me of the compulsive nature of *Trials 2*, where I would restart levels time after time and settle for nothing less than a clean run every time. It's the same thing with *OlliOlli World*, but with a more esoteric aesthetic.



68 FOOTBALL MANAGER 2022

RELEASED November 8, 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 66 ▼

Dave: While *Football Manager 2022* absolutely is a management simulation of what it's like to control the finer points of a football team in modern times, it's also one of the most engaging RPGs around. Most people will simply dismiss the game as little more than a set of spreadsheets with no soul, but for the people for whom *FM* has become *the* game they play it means so much more than that.

A wider career can last for years, even decades, as you live a full life in football. And in that lifetime you can experience the many varied highs and lows of football; whether that's a last minute winner delivering an elusive Champions League win, a courageous full-back declaring their sexuality to a packed press conference, a brilliant season pushing your tiny home team of Bath into the professional leagues, or the pain of relegation, sackings, and a son who turns out to be too rubbish a footballer to fit in with your team, so you have to destroy their career at the tender age of 21 with a cancelled contract.

It's also become a game I don't just play at my PC; I deliberate over transfer decisions in the shower in the morning, agonise over tactical tweaks long after I've shut down my rig from a bad run of matches, and dream of actually making it into the football league again.

67 UNAVOWED

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Robin: This game's such a vision for what point-and-click games could be today. Instead of nostalgia, it pulls in inspiration from Bioware and Telltale to craft a brilliantly textured narrative and world to go with its smart puzzles.

Fraser: Not just one of the best adventure games around, *Unavowed* is also a high point for urban fantasy. There are shades of Dresden Files and John Constantine, but this is a singular yarn, grounding the fire mages, ghost assistants and confused demons with human drama, and setting it in a version of New York that absolutely feels tangible. Designer Dave Gilbert loves this city and loves these characters, and that makes me love them too.

66 JACKBOX PARTY PACK 8

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Morgan: Jackbox Games continues to demonstrate why it's the master of party games. You'd think eight games later these packs would be out of good ideas, but *Party Pack 8* features some of the cleverest games the series has ever seen, like a hidden drawing murder mystery game Weapons Drawn or a genius twist on Family Feud in Poll Mine. I especially love the creativity of Job Job, a game in which you write stories using word clouds written by each other.

Imogen: I wanted *Jackbox* to be kicked off this list in favour of *Gartic Phone*. Though it's unique and fun, it's the series that's good, not any one individual *Jackbox*. Whenever I've played *Jackbox* with friends, I've needed to boot up multiple entries to enjoy the night to the fullest.

65 GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Morgan: This gorgeous, well-written, and downright fun story didn't get the love it truly deserved across the internet last year. Yes, the combat is simple, but Square Enix Montreal's take on the Guardians of the Galaxy demonstrates a lot of love for the source material and a high bar of comedy that I wouldn't have expected from the *Deus Ex* studio. The characters are so good, this game made me like the Marvel movies a lot less. Give it a shot.

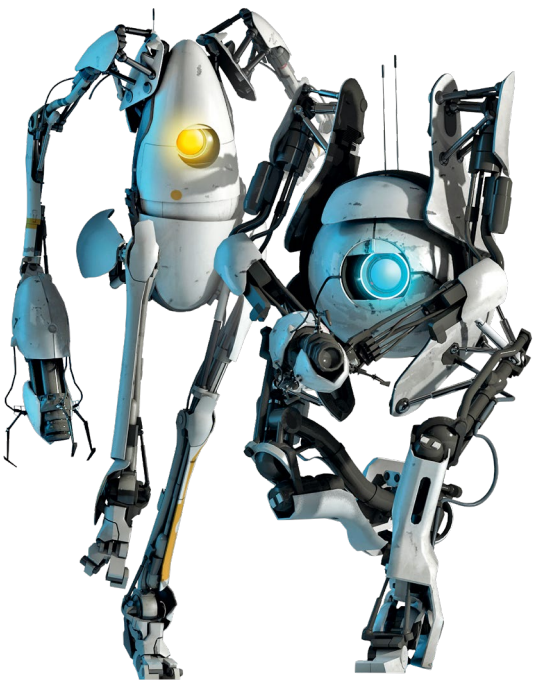
TOP 100 2022

64 CARD SHARK

RELEASED 2022 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Fraser: I'm terrible at cards and even worse at sleight of hand, but *Card Shark* makes me feel like a master. As the mute apprentice of Comte de Saint-Germain, I've learned a lot about how to part 18th-century French nobles and revolutionaries from their cash. The mechanics of deceit are both complex and compelling, embracing the tactile nature of card games and then layering oodles of intrigue and a nice big conspiracy on top.

I finished the whole thing in a single long afternoon, but I've hardly stopped thinking about it since. I even picked up a real deck of cards to see if the game rubbed off on me, but no, I've still got the dexterity and wits of a sloth.



63 PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011 | **LAST POSITION** No change

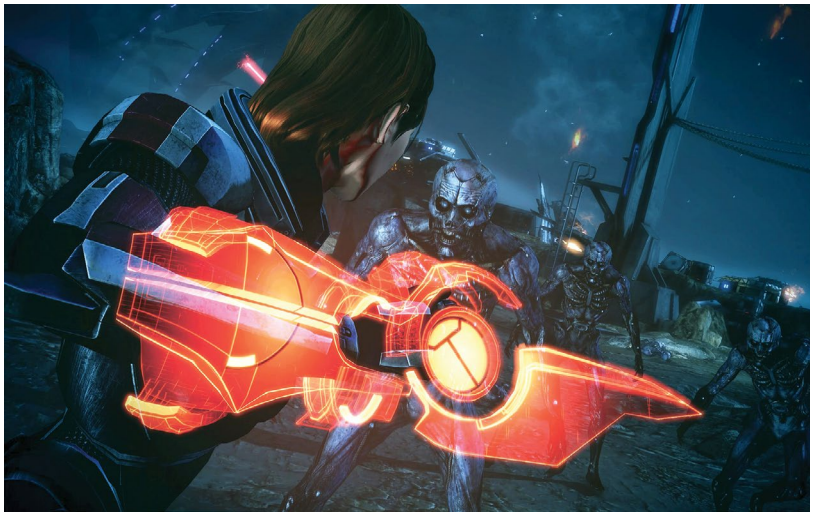
Wes: Surely you've heard of Valve's FPS puzzle comedy *Portal* and its sequel, which will make you laugh and feel incredibly smart at the same time. I'm going to assume you've played the campaign, because you strike me as a reader of fine taste and culture. What really keeps *Portal 2* on the Top 100 year after year is its co-op campaign and staggering Steam Workshop scene, providing effectively infinite test chambers to solve. Play nothing but *Portal 2* and *Kerbal Space Program* for the next year and you could probably earn an honorary physics degree.

Nat: It's so easy to forget how Valve's writing was on top of its game in 2011. Razor sharp and effortlessly funny, even without memetic cake jokes.

62 MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Nat: As far back as I remember, I'd always written off *Microsoft Flight Simulator* as this stodgy old thing, something dads fuss over on their yellowed old CRT in the corner of the garage. But a 1:1 scale model of the Earth is a hell of a thing, and with a flight model that can be as accessible or as finicky as you like, I've found endless joy in even the familiar drudgery of a Edinburgh to London flight – especially if I'm doing it in the *Halo* Pelican.



61 MASS EFFECT LEGENDARY EDITION

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 91 ▲

Jody: So many space games are about being a pilot or the spaceship itself. *Mass Effect* understood we wanted to be the ship's captain, just like on TV. The one who bosses people around, gives inspiring speeches, leads the away team, plots the journey, and, yes, macks on blue aliens.
Imogen: *Mass Effect* is two of my favourite aspects of games rolled into one. Stupid otherworldly politics that make no sense and gun action. Oh and my third favourite too, smooching aliens. The point is *Mass Effect* games showed me how deep relationships can go in games whether they be platonic, intergalactic, or romantic. Nothing has ever made me feel the same as realising the consequences of the suicide run or saying goodbye to Tali.
Ted: I often find myself ragging on *Mass Effect*, its militarism, the way it ended, the questionable ethics of its workplace romances. But at the end of the day I replay the whole trilogy at least once every two years. It's a touchstone for me, a world I'm always happy to go back to. It also doesn't hurt that the Vanguard class lets you teleport around shotgunning dudes in the most satisfying way imaginable.

60 PARADISE KILLER

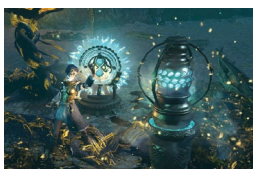
RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** 59 ▼

Morgan: A murder mystery visual novel set in a twisted vision of heaven. The pitch was enough for me to try *Paradise Killer*, but what kept me around is the unique approach to its central mystery, allowing players to track each citizen's timelines, solve puzzles out of order, and make your own conclusions about whodunnit. It's pretty serious business wrapped in a completely absurd world, with memorable characters like Lady Love Dies, Dr Doom Jazz, and The Witness To The End.

59 PATH OF EXILE

RELEASED 2013 | **LAST POSITION** 54 ▼

Fraser: After nearly a decade, no ARPG has managed to grip me like *Path of Exile* and its incredible, labyrinthine passive skill tree. And with every new expansion and league, it subtly reinvents itself, beckoning me back. There are always new builds to experiment with. New challenges to overcome. *Path of Exile 2* is coming, but I'm in no particular rush to move on.
Jody: If you find *Path of Exile* a bit murky and boring-looking, may I recommend the vibrant MMO/ARPG *Lost Ark*?



58 SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 53 ▼

Wes: I put 120 hours into *Elden Ring* this year, yet it's *Sekiro* I think about most. It's FromSoft's tightest game: all action, no RPG fat, 10,000 blood-spurting death blows standing between you and victory. Is there a Louvre for ninjas?
Sean: *Sekiro* did for me what all of Soulsborne could not: it made parrying fun.

57 ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA

RELEASED 2020
LAST POSITION 52 ▼

Lauren A: *Valhalla* is the least *Assassin's Creed*-y game in the franchise, making it the best of all. It should definitely be higher up in this list because who doesn't love roleplaying as a sexy Viking lady with a big hammer? The DLC turn *Valhalla* from a regular Viking adventure into a mythical masterpiece as you smash enemies to bits.

56 UNPACKING

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New

Mollie: A zen puzzler with very few words, yet which says so much through the possessions you neatly stow away inside cupboards and wardrobes across multiple years and living spaces.
Jody: Every object clicks in place delightfully, telling a story while it does. But the partner who doesn't leave wallspace for your degree, aaargh.

55 PREY

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** No change ▲

Morgan: *Prey* is everything great about immersive sims crammed into one huge space station. It's got wrenches, shotguns, computers with mouse pointers, and a set of systemic rules that everything follows. I'll never forget the first time I bypassed a locked door by sniping a button with a Nerf crossbow. This is Arkane's grand homage to *System Shock* and I'm still amazed it turned out so good.

Jody: This is the direction I want immersive sims to go. A singular location modelled down to the tiny, characterful details. Talos I is a lonely place, perfect for sci-fi horror, but you get to know its people through the things you find, even character sheets from their roleplaying game.

54 THE SIMS 4

RELEASED 2014 | **LAST POSITION** 42 ▼

Lauren M: Every one of us who enjoys *The Sims 4* is eagerly awaiting the day it has legitimate competition. Until that happens, it's still genuinely the only game filling the ongoing demand for building dream homes and simulating wacky families. Plus I can be a werewolf living in a cottage now.

Mollie: My love-hate relationship with *The Sims 4* continues. There's still nothing quite like it, but I struggle to recommend a game that requires remortgaging your house to experience fully.

53 CHIVALRY 2

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 58 ▲

Tyler W: *Chivalry 2* wouldn't work if its combat design weren't so clever. The complex blocking, riposting, and countering system creates the possibility for skilled players to enter into a multiplayer swordfight outnumbered and win, which is brilliant. At the same time, a lot of *Chiv 2*'s fun purely comes down to the volume of janky, farcical ways to beat other players.

Thus the medieval warfare game charged a few yards up the list this year thanks to its Steam release and a big update which added two new objective maps and, most importantly, horses. I've already commended *Chiv 2*'s jousting in detail elsewhere in this magazine, but the gist is that galloping around with a pointy stick is as fun as it sounds like it would be.

52 DORFROMANTIK

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Robin: One of the things I love most about *Dorfromantik* is that it is fundamentally aimless. As you build up your little slice of countryside one tile at a time, trying to match up elements like fields, rivers, and railways, you're not trying to exploit the landscape or build a map-conquering empire; you're not recruiting an army to conquer your enemies; you're not even really trying to complete an over-arching goal, most of the time, other than just a good score and a pleasing layout. You're basically just quietly piecing together a place that would be quite nice to go on holiday to. There's a satisfaction to placing pieces in the best, highest-scoring ways, but really for me it's subsumed by the satisfaction of this lovely field all fitting together just right inside this perfect loop of river. It's one of the best mindfulness tools I've ever used.

Which is perhaps a sign that I should just get into model railways.

Katie: Everyone keeps telling me this game is super chill, but it kind of stresses me out. I think it's down to the fact I'm always having to shift my attention to the other side of the map where some forest or village needs completing. It's not even timed, but it forces me to go against my mother's wisdom: "Finish one thing before you start another."

51 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

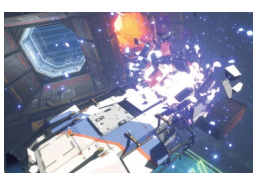
RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** 21 ▼

Nat: *Rainbow Six Siege* isn't my go-to shooter (see no. 4 for that). But it's the best take on a slower, more tactical kind of shooter – a more bombastic *Counter-Strike* where positioning is key, kills are quick, and every single wall can come crashing down at a moment's notice. Plus, while the launch lineup was a fairly dull roster of masked *CS:GO* rejects, *Siege*'s operators have only gotten cooler, gayer and more mechanically bizarre as the game continues to grow.

50 HARDSPACE: SHIPBREAKER

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Jorge: The thing about *Hardspace: Shipbreaker* that I love is how fast it can escalate at any given moment. One minute you're skilfully cutting apart a ship and making some serious cash then, ooops, who put that fuel line there? It's a game that loves putting you under pressure. Death isn't a big deal because you're a replaceable clone. And sometimes clones accidentally blow themselves up. Work in the future is hard to come by, I guess.



PERSONAL PICK

Ted Litchfield

DREAD DELUSION

This Early Access RPG sees you exploring a civilisation clinging to the asteroids orbiting a constellation of neutron stars. Its open-ended exploration hooked me, but the high-concept writing of the *Planescape: Torment* school really blew me away.

PERSONAL PICK

Chris Livingston

WEST OF LOATHING

An open world Wild West RPG filled with evil cattle, ghost pickles, and most importantly, more jokes per minute than any other game, ever. Long after I'd finished the main story I unravelled a surprisingly deep mystery while looking for (and finding) more laughs.

49 KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2011
LAST POSITION No change

Dave: It would be easy to dismiss this 11-year-old space sim. But there are so many layers to *KSP*, so much charm, and so many tricky, varied challenges, that it's still absolutely worth playing.

The rewarding career mode, and addictive physics-based difficulty make it a game I will always have installed on my PC.

48 SPELUNKY 2

RELEASED 2020
LAST POSITION No change

Evan: Its procedurally-generated environments and slippery physics are a brutal combination, but *Spelunky 2*'s unfair deaths are balanced by moments of wonder as you dig through the Moon. Get knocked into a lava pit by baby Draculas on one run, discover the secret passage to an alien mothership on the next.

47 IT TAKES TWO

RELEASED 2021
LAST POSITION New entry

Imogen: *It Takes Two* is a co-op adventure in which a divorce-bound couple's kid accidentally turns them into toys. The story is nothing special – and I hate that damn thrusting, gyrating book – but *It Takes Two* has some of the best platforming we've ever seen so it deserves this spot. That poor elephant though...

46 FORZA HORIZON 5

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Jacob: We've left the rainy coastline of Britain and flown halfway across the world for the next stop in the *Forza Horizon* series. The bright sunshine and varied landscape of Mexico makes for an excellent playground to burn up rubber in, and there's no shortage of excellent cars to take for a spin in what has to be *Forza*'s finest and most fun Horizon fest to date. Just try and take it easy on the anime car decals, yeah?

Phil: Have you been spying on me?

45 HALF-LIFE: ALYX

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Dave: That liquid shader and Jeff... *Alyx* is easily the best VR game and one of the best *Half-Life* games.

Chris L: Despite being wedged in the middle of an established timeline, *Alyx* managed to take some surprising turns and contain some, ahem, full-life consequences for *Half-Life* lore. And I've never played a VR game that felt so completely comfortable and natural to move around in that I was able to keep my headset on for hours at a time.

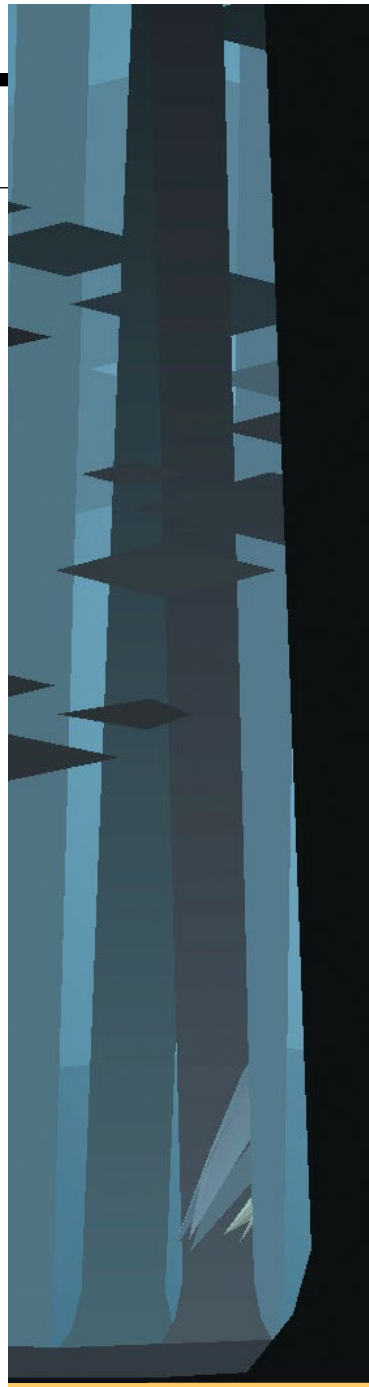
44 ROCKET LEAGUE

RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** 27 ▼

Tyler W: Early in this year's Top 100 meeting I said that I'd deal with it if the rest of the staff decided to bump *Rocket League* off the list to make room for something new. After all, what more can I say about a multiplayer game that doesn't need any more iteration to be fun forever?

I've been writing about how Psyonix's car-football game is great for seven years now, and it continues to be great, but I have no notes. Not any that relate to the fundamental design of *Rocket League*, at least; as much as I've probably blamed 'the physics' for bad nights, I wouldn't change a thing about the weird, ultra-challenging way the rocket-powered cars handle. The more I thought about *Rocket League* and all the good times I've had over the course of my thousand-plus hours, the more I resented my past self for being so deferential. No *Witcher 3* fans are shoving it out of the top 10 (spoiler) just because we've spent the past seven years saying that it's good, so why should I let a game I once called "the only good videogame" be cut?

I'm glad that Rich, PC Gamer's other primary *Rocket League*-liker, kept his guard up and it only ended up moving 17 places. I know it isn't traditional to say this unsarcastically, but what a save!



TOP 100 2022

43 KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

RELEASED 2013 | **LAST POSITION** 35

Tyler C: Playing *Kentucky Route Zero* must be what it's like to experience ASMR. It's a tingly, intimate adventure game about the rot of capitalism that slips into the deepest parts of my brain and whispers to me that, despite everything, maybe it'll be okay.
Nat: A haunting tale of American decline that seamlessly traverses adventure game, text adventure, amateur stage play and dive bar gig. *Kentucky Route Zero* is a literary experience rivalled only by the likes of *Disco Elysium*, one less constrained by the look and shape of what a 'game' is supposed to be – especially when it comes to between-act interludes. Play it with the lights dimmed, and a heart open to some literary melancholy.

42 QUAKE REMASTERED

RELEASED 2022 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Wes: Groundbreaking FPS, Romero's last game at id, grandfather of esports, progenitor of the rocket jump, yada yada yada. *Quake* could live in the Top 100 forever, honestly, but it's back for an especially good reason this year: Nightdive's 2021 remaster, which makes it absolutely sing on modern PCs. No more digging around folders to configure one of the dozen confusing *Quake* source ports: you can just boot it, crank your framerate to 144, tweak your FOV, and be off and running. *Quake Remastered* also includes some entirely new stuff: *Wolfenstein: The New Order* developer MachineGames built two expansions that dwarf the scale and intricacy of the original game, riffing on '90s level design after 25 years of study. A+.

41 HADES

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Jody: Supergiant's a consistent studio with a string of bangers to its name. Hades' combat is frenetic, varying with loadout but usually built around using a perfect-feeling dash to get yourself both out of and into danger. The story's just as engaging, taking the obscure son of the god of the underworld and making his quest to escape into a sexy soap opera.
Imogen: Hades is hot. Hot action, hot setting, hot characters, hot dialogue. What's not to like?

PERSONAL PICK

Jody Macgregor

QUEST FOR GLORY 2: TRIAL BY FIRE

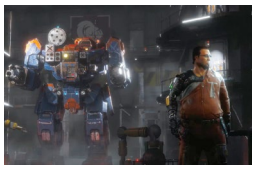
The *Quest for Glory* series combines puzzling and questing. When you've had enough of one you bounce to the other. My favourite's *Trial by Fire*, with its Arabian Nights theme and goofy references to the Marx Brothers and Casablanca.

PERSONAL PICK

Robin Valentine

LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

As the best ever online CCG sadly leaves the Top 100 this year, I must ensure it is not forgotten. Its combo of a generous free-to-play model, tense matches, and well-maintained meta make it perfect for rescuing your friends from *Hearthstone*.



40 BATTLETECH

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** No change

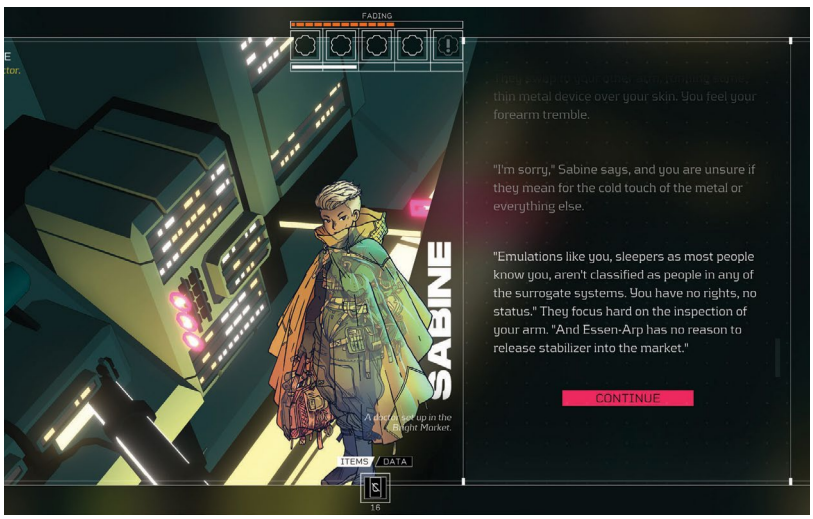
Nat: Harebrained Schemes' riff on Battletech is proof that the stodgy old wargame could be brilliant. It's a turn-based strategy that hides the fussy dice-rolls of the tabletop game without losing their complexity.

Jorge: *Battletech* is one of those strategy games I can play all the time. Career mode lets your mercenary troupe take jobs all over the star system in any way you want for fame and profit. If you love mechs and strategy, *Battletech* is a no-brainer.

39 INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** 25 ▼

Robin: I really think this is as tight and focused as turn-based strategy has ever been. Every level is an exquisite, satisfying puzzle, with the roguelike structure adding enough weight and drama to make you agonise over every move. When I first saw that this was still on our list, part of me thought, 'Has it had its day?' But the truth is I don't think anyone's even come close to making something as brilliantly precise in the time since.



38 CITIZEN SLEEPER

RELEASED 2022 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Jody: A synthetic being on the run, you pretend to be an ordinary citizen of Erlin's Eye station by spending a pool of dice each day on activities like working shifts at a dive bar, tending a garden, or hacking security systems. Meanwhile, your artificial body's condition decays and your planned obsolescence draws closer. So do the hunters who want to drag you back to the corporation that technically still owns you. There are more pleasant timers too: as you make friends their stories unfold, a new chapter arriving every few cycles.

Keeping track of all this can feel almost like a job, but really what it adds up to is a full life. One with danger and compromise, but also companionship and inspiration. The blimps in Blade Runner say a new life awaits you in the off-world colonies, and in *Citizen Sleeper* that's true.

Wes: The lovely character illustrations really pulled me into the lives of everyone I met, and the writing took it from there. I expected the dice rolls to be tedious additions to a visual novel, but they end up essential to *Citizen Sleeper*'s vibe. As your body breaks down you have fewer dice to work with, so I had my heart in my throat more than once on a dangerous job. The dice add tension to each early decision, and a gratifying sense of having 'made it' as life slowly gets easier.

TOP 100 2022

37 NIER: AUTOMATA

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Ted: This existentialist sci-fi ARPG's runaway success turned its creator, the masked weirdo Yoko Taro, into a gaming icon, but I remember my feeling of shock and euphoria when I discovered it was being made at all. Poor sales on the first *Nier* caused developer Cavia to shutter, and it's a small miracle we got this mind-melting masterpiece of androids duking it out at the edge of history.
Mollie: One of those games I wish I could experience again for the first time. Gorgeous and emotionally charged with some of the best damn combat I've ever had the pleasure of experiencing. Bless Yoko Taro for bringing 2B into this world.
Wes: What other game will let you commit suicide by eating a fish?

36 RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Wes: How the hell did one-man developer Lucas Pope decide that unravelling the mysterious fate of a 19th century ship and its dead crew using a magic pocket watch would make for a brilliant puzzle game? Lucas, if you're reading, would you trade brains with me? Mine's only lightly used, but it does come with priceless memories of the 12 hours it took me to learn what happened to every sailor on this damned vessel.
Chris L: It's refreshing (and risky) for a game to trust the player as much as *Return of the Obra Dinn* does, but by giving me the absolute minimum of help to untangle a bunch of interwoven mysteries, it meant that each time I solved one I felt like a genius. A unique detective game.

35 GUILD WARS 2

RELEASED 2012 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Lauren: Somehow, it was an MMO that finally made me into a better platformer. Never mind the excellent living story, PvP, and top-tier in-game holidays. I love jumping puzzles.
Phil: I *tolerate* jumping puzzles, but I love *Guild Wars 2*. As someone who dips in and out of games erratically, and *always* forgets to cancel an MMO subscription in time, *Guild Wars 2* has been a blessing. No subscription, and its expansions don't invalidate gear and skills I earned before.

34 OLD WORLD

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Fraser: *Civilization* might still be the biggest name in historical 4Xs, but Old World will make you forget all about it. Mohawk Games' ancient world strategy romp is a special concoction, splicing turn-based conquest and expansion with personal diplomacy, intrigue and heaps of drama. It's *Civ* for fans of *Crusader Kings*, and the kind of game I dreamed of but never thought would appear. It's people, not nations, that move this epic forwards. Stepping out on their spouses, murdering their siblings, building cults – they're a busy bunch. And by limiting it to the ancient world, Mohawk gives these characters room to grow, instead of skipping a century in the blink of an eye. After all this soapy drama, it's hard to go back to *Civ*'s comparatively plain immortal rulers.

33 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

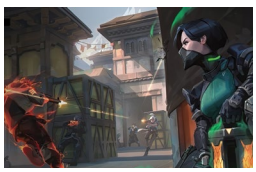
RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 22 ▼

Nat: *Halo Infinite* was, unfortunately, a bit of a bust. But who needs Master Chief's flawed open-world outing when the MCC is right here, a perfect package of four all-time great FPS campaigns (plus *Halo 4*), with the ability to hop between the multiplayer offerings for each at will.

While the seasonal updates have ceased, the game continues to receive cosmetics and playlist updates every now and again – and with full mod support for the first three games, the *MCC* will likely continue to shape and reshape what *Halo* on PC looks like for years to come. *Halo Infinite*? Never heard of it.

Dave: *Halo*? Yawn.

Wes: After the tyranny of Xbox Live's rigid playlists, I love being able to just click 'CTF.' That's peak *Halo*.



32 VALORANT

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** 79 ▲

Imogen: Another year, another jump up the list for *Valorant*. Riot Games' delve into low time-to-kill, ability supported FPS mayhem is going from strength to strength, and the game keeps growing and improving at an astonishing rate. What makes *Valorant* special isn't just its cast, balancing, maps, or visuals, it's Riot's dedication to supporting the game with players in mind. Never have I played a game with such a continuous rolling meta, and it keeps *Valorant* exciting.

31 DESTINY 2

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Sean: *Destiny 2* still feels so fluent as a shooter to me: the way that its movement, weapons, and supers combine to create such an audacious style of gameplay in both PvE and multiplayer. It can't help but feel like the evolution of what I loved in the original *Halo* games, and that's an ongoing experiment I want to be part of.
Phil: 'Experiment' is the right way to describe it. Over the years, Bungie has completely changed the cadence and content of its seasons, had multiple different systems for its guns, and now even removes older campaigns and activities in order to prioritise the new. There's still not an obvious map for how a live-service game should operate, and Bungie's never been afraid of taking a shot in the dark – for better *and* worse.

Nevertheless, *Destiny 2* is broadly in a good place right now. This year's expansion, *The Witch Queen*, added the best campaign in the series' history – filling it with exciting encounters that build on the already strong foundation of its movement, gunplay and space magic. But as good as the campaign is, the real joy comes after – in raids and dungeons that feature some of the smartest and most exciting FPS encounter design that you'll find. Last Wish lets you fight a dragon. It's wild.

30 DEEP ROCK GALACTIC

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Robin: Forget *No Man's Sky*, this co-op shooter is the true king of procedural exploration. Even 80 hours in, I still regularly discover stuff that blows my mind. And the brilliant thing is, it's not just set dressing – *Deep Rock Galactic*'s mechanics, based as much around digging, drilling, and navigating as combat, force you to interact directly with these unique environments. Every weird rock formation is its own puzzle to work out or obstacle to overcome. Seriously clever.

29 MONSTER HUNTER: RISE

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Mollie: I still prefer *World*, but nobody can deny that *Rise* is a damn good *Monster Hunter* game. It's fluid, mobile and great to look at despite being a Switch port.
Sean: With the *Sunbreak* expansion *Rise* goes from strength to strength, deepening the combat mechanics and adding some of the most spectacular fights I've seen in a long time. NPC hunters finally fight alongside you, too. What other game lets you KO a monster by hurling a giant insect at its face?

28 FORTNITE

RELEASED 2017
LAST POSITION New entry

Jorge: I can't believe I'm saying this, but, I'm a *Fortnite* guy now. No Build Mode has made *Fortnite* more approachable and frankly more fun than ever before. Big epic events keep things fresh, and are a reason to pick up a battle pass. Also it's the only game where you can play as Batman beating up Dr Strange with a lightsaber.

27 OUTER WILDS

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 15 ▼

Phil: A time-loop adventure with a simple yet daunting premise: discover why your sun keeps blowing up. *Outer Wilds*' handcrafted solar system is full of weird and wonderful ideas that make each 22-minute run a joy. Each planet is a little puzzle unto itself, packed full of interesting things.
Imogen: Accepting your death has never been so enjoyable.

26 STRANGE HORTICULTURE

RELEASED 2022
LAST POSITION New entry

Jody: You run a plant shop and solve puzzles, helping villagers find herbs to cure skin irritations, or flowers to brighten a wedding. Then *Strange Horticulture* grows to encompass poisonings, druids, and supernatural investigators until you're entangled in a mystery with stakes much higher than whether Mr Burbidge gets a rash.

TOP 100 2022

25 TEARDOWN

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** 66 ▲

Nat: *Teardown* left early access this year, and that rip-smart campaign of creatively destructive heists is a small part of why it's shot so far up this year. But *Teardown*'s real killer feature is that, over the past year, it's secretly turned into *Garry's Mod 2*.

When you're done tearing through the campaign's half-dozen levels, you can pop into the Steam Workshop and find hundreds more voxelated sandboxes to smash, tools with which to smash them, and modifiers to the way things even smash apart. It is, in short, smashing stuff.

Morgan: And don't forget the surprising campaign! On top of being a very cool toy, *Teardown* is also one of the smartest, most open-ended puzzle games I've played.

24 GOD OF WAR

RELEASED 2022 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Jorge: It's no surprise that the PC port of the best game on PlayStation 5 makes the list. In many ways, *God of War* on the PC is the best version of this epic father/son bonding trip. Unlocked framerates, ultrawide monitor support, and a host of graphical options only available on PC make the feeling of tossing your magical axe at the skull of a gruesome troll into a near-religious experience. I just hope *God of War: Ragnorok* doesn't take as long to makes it way to PC.

23 TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER 2

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Jody: *Total War: Warhammer 2* remains the peak of Creative Assembly's brand of expansive, more-is-more strategy. That's not because *Warhammer 3* is bad, but because it's had less time to scale up. It can't compete with what all the updates, rebalances, and DLC have done for *Warhammer 2*.

Mortal Empires made it truly gigantic, and later patches streamlined the turn times. It picked up undead Pharaohs, zombie pirate captains, and a goblin warlord who is also a chef. I don't like to throw around the word "epic" because I don't know if many videogames really deserve the same adjective as Beowulf, but *Warhammer 2* feels pretty epic. Maybe *Warhammer 3* will get there in a year's time. I hope it does.

22 STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016 | **LAST POSITION** 26 ▲

Mollie: Many have tried, but still nobody can capture the magic of *Stardew Valley*'s immaculate vibes. This quaint pixelated farming sim is the first game I recommend to anyone looking for something cheap and cosy to play. I've spent countless hours jazzing up my farm, letting Abigail eat a small quarry's worth of quartz and marrying Shane for the umpteenth time.

It's the kind of game I'll 'quickly' boot up to start a new farm before blinking and realising it's now 4am while I'm frantically bombing my way down to the bottom of the Skull Cavern.

Katie: Confession time! I've never actually gotten past summer in *Stardew Valley*. It's on my gaming to-do list, but I keep getting distracted by other farming sims. I tend to complain about the game on the internet, and yet I'm always drawn back to it.

There's something special about Stardew that will always hold a place in my heart. It's one of the only co-op games my partner and I have played that didn't stress me out, since our base wasn't getting attacked every five minutes. Also I can send him off into the mines while I pootle around, watering the crops and decorating, maybe doing a spot of fishing. It's what virtual farm life is all about: sharing the load.

21 DOOM ETERNAL

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** 18 ▼

Morgan: It may have fallen a few spots this year, but *Doom Eternal* is still one of the best FPS campaigns around. The sequel demonstrates a clear throughline from where *Doom* started and where shooters have gone since, marrying the original's simplicities with a few decades worth of good ideas to spice up the action.

Eternal finished the work *Doom* began in 2016. As I airdashed across Hell, laser-swording aliens in two, I wondered if shooters will ever be this good again.

20 YAKUZA 7

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Lauren M: I didn't believe a new main character could carry the *Yakuza* series mantle until I fell in love with eternal optimist Kasuga Ichiban.

Jorge: *Yakuza 7* restored my faith in humanity. It's also a fun JRPG in which you fight enemies called Piss Wizards. It never ceases to put a smile on my face.

Phil: *Yakuza*'s shift to JRPG has revitalised the series, allowing its broad, childish humour and deep love of distractions and minigames shine in a new way.

PERSONAL PICK

Jacob Ridley

PROJECT ZOMBOID

A stellar survival simulator disguised as simple fun. The depth to this game is phenomenal – one mistake and you're overrun. But that's not all that makes it sing, it's the way it's all so very easy to dive into with friends since its major multiplayer content update.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage

DEUS EX

Still one of the best immersive sims you can play. It can be hard to get into – many of its ideas have since been streamlined and refined – but those rough edges are the result of its sheer ambition. *Deus Ex* is still the master, able to reward every last bit of the effort you put into it.

19 UMURANGI GENERATION

RELEASED 2020
LAST POSITION No change

Tyler C: A game that blares. It drips with a reality that I can taste even after capturing the end of its crumbling world. It's potent in a way that games so rarely are.
Nat: A loud, furious protest piece that firmly shuts down complaints about politics in games, all while functioning as the coolest photo mode around.

18 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED 2018
LAST POSITION 5 ▼

Morgan: Look, Rockstar's definitive cowboy shooter and horse care sim is one of the greatest games ever, but I couldn't convince these chuckleheads to keep it higher on the list. That said, *Red Dead Online* has had few meaningful updates in four years. A shared world cowboy MMO is too good an idea to keep screwing up.

17 HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** 16 ▼

Wes: The mystery, melancholy, and pin-sharp action in *Hollow Knight* kinda ruined *Metroid: Zero Mission* when I played it last year. *Metroid*'s blocky map design and missile-spam boss battles felt so quaint in a post-*Hollow Knight* world. I expect to be obnoxiously lobbying for *Silksong* to take the no. 1 spot next year.

16 WILDERMYTH

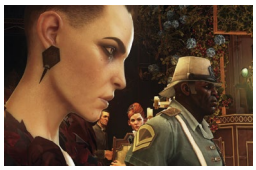
RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 14 ▼

Jorge: One of the most unique games you'll ever play. This fantasy turn-based strategy game uses procedural storytelling to craft a seamless narrative in a pop-up storybook art style. Each playthrough is different and you never quite know what's in store for your band of heroes as you move from chapter to chapter in a world filled with magic and monsters. Characters can die of old age, have kids, turn into werewolves, or replace severed limbs with mystical prosthetics.

15 DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016 | **LAST POSITION** 13 ▼

Phil: Arkane's masterpiece, and still the best first-person stealth game you can play today. The levels are peerless, full of intricate paths that reward exploration and mastery of your tools. The action is refined, allowing for both methodical planning and graceful execution. And the commitment to immersion means that every choice and action is reflected back at you. As Arkane shifts towards taking the game's lessons into other genres and styles, I fear we won't see its like again for a long time.



14 VALHEIM

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 10 ▼

Lauren M: *Valheim* single-handedly rekindled my love for crafting survival games. Even in Early Access it ripped apart what wasn't working for me in the genre, setting my new standard for building systems and finally making me care about cooking.
Sarah: I still love the low-stress vibe of just existing in this world. Heading out to explore or getting stuck into a building project without having to constantly check hunger levels is just one of the things that makes this my favourite survival game.
Chris L: I've written so much about *Valheim* since it launched I'm not sure what's left to say, so rather than gush about how it thoughtfully revised familiar survival systems and shrewdly left PvP as an afterthought to focus on co-op, I'll just talk about vibes. *Valheim* has the best vibes in games, and so many of them.

There's the cozy, comfy feeling of tinkering in your base and doing a spot of farming, but there's also the gripping terror of being caught in a storm at sea in the middle of the night. There's the spookiness of the black forest, the utter dread of the swamps, and the heavenly lure of the plains (before a deathsquito snipes you, of course). It's replaced *Minecraft* as my go-to procedurally generated world of choice, and that's saying something.

TOP 100 2022

13 XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016 | **LAST POSITION** 12

Jody: *XCOM 2* remains ahead of its imitators in the turn-based squad tactics space thanks mainly to tactility. When a sprinting soldier slides into cover it feels like moving a board game piece, when the camera swings down in a dramatic moment it's like leaning down to get a closer view of a tabletop. *XCOM 2* is what I saw in my head when playing Warhammer 40,000.

Though some of its imitators have abandoned random chance-to-miss, going back to *XCOM* has made me appreciate its diciness too. There's a gambler's thrill to the surprise hit against the odds, and the missed 90% shot at a Viper who is about to crush a teammate that forces you to scramble for an alternate solution.

12 DEATH STRANDING

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 6

Dave: Always love Kojima games... until I reach both the expositional cutscene event horizon and the hard no barrier of those damned character names. There's always this point where I can't take any more and just have to sit back and go, "naaaaaaaaaaaaaah".

Jorge: Despite its mostly nonsensical story featuring people named Mama and Die-Hardman, *Death Stranding*'s gameplay and overall vibe are just splendid. Whether it's finding a way to deliver a pizza past a field filled with weird shadow-goo monsters without getting murdered or reconstructing a highway across the midwest of the United States that'll make zipping across the land on your future trike easier, *Death Stranding* is a game like no other.

11 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED 2017 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Jody: It's a good time to be into fantasy CRPGs, even if you're one of those heathens who thinks the C stands for 'classic' instead of 'computer', with games like Solasta and Pathfinder taking tabletop experiences and dropping them onto your PC in relatively faithful fashion. *Divinity: Original Sin 2* is still top-tier thanks to the way it anticipates everything. Yes, you *can* be a skeleton who disguises their undead nature by wearing a bucket on their head, then pick locks with your finger bones.

10 FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED 2013 | **LAST POSITION** 17 ▲

Lauren M: I finally started my free trial and now I stand around Limsa Lominsa admiring everyone else's outfits. Can recommend.
Tyler C: A friend once described *FFXIV* to me as a singleplayer JRPG with community mechanics. They were right. I continue to be astounded with how incredibly intimate and massive *FFXIV* can be, especially in a genre that often trivialises your impact in the world. It's home in a way that no other MMO has been for me for years.
Mollie: The only game that encapsulates feeling horny, happy and infuriated all at once. 3,000 hours later and *FFXIV* keeps pulling me in. 2022 wouldn't have been the same without savage raids, bunny boys and Limsa Lominsa.

9 THE WITCHER 3

RELEASED 2015 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Lauren A: Fiddly combat aside, *The Witcher 3* has some of the best characters and storytelling in this list. I still love cutting about as the grumpy Geralt and romancing Yen. While the main story is full of love, loss and subterfuge, it's the sidequests that really make The Witcher 3 shine.

Blood and Wine was by far the superior DLC, and Equine Phantoms is its best side quest, with Geralt tripping on mushrooms as he has a friendly chat with Roach, who side-steps the "how come you always show up right away when I whistle?" question.

By the end of the expansions, you really understand that inside of an emotionless freak, Geralt is a grump old dad who loves his hot wife, horse and swords.

8 MINECRAFT

RELEASED 2011 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Lauren M: As was said in the yearly Top 100 debates, "recommending *Minecraft* is like recommending water," which maybe implies it's boring but also that it's essential. *Minecraft* is still the bedrock (pun intended) of the genre. It innately supports both creative and combative pursuits, but the community continues to supply even more playstyles in PvP servers, custom platforming maps, overhaul mods, and third-party tools for immense builds. Over ten years on, Minecraft feels as enduring as the internet itself. If I ever grow bored of it, it's only ever until I find some new niche fixation.
Mollie: No other game makes smacking blocks and building pretty things this much fun.

7 SLAY THE SPIRE

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Imogen: As a recent *Slay the Spire* convert, I wasn't satisfied with just playing it on my PC, I had to own it on mobile too for ganks on the go. It's the perfect card game.
Robin: *Slay the Spire* isn't just brilliant, it's PC gaming canon at this point. It launched the deck-building roguelike genre into the mainstream, and spawned a whole family of imitators and descendents. Even the new Firaxis game takes heavy inspiration from it – when the king of turn-based strategy picks up what you're putting down, you must be doing something right. And, crucially, it's still the best at what it does. *Monster Train*, *Fights in Tight Spaces*, *Roguebook*... they're good games, but they're not *Slay the Spire*.

6 HUNT: SHOWDOWN

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** 28 ▲

Evan: Crytek's creepy 'extraction shooter' is smart, bold, but above all, messy. You're fighting it out in swamps and mines crawling with headless horrors and shambling beehive women, sloshing through ponds clutching a revolver slathered in mud, aiming it at a shirtless man who is also slathered in mud. "Screw this place" is not something I say about *Fortnite* maps.

But out of that ugliness comes beauty of design. *Hunt* challenges our modern concept of balance in multiplayer shooters. The unevenness of its weaponset creates a true marksman's game of tracking prey across terrain.

You can defeat one of *Hunt*'s boss monsters, earning the match's prize bounty, only to be gunned down on your way to the finish line by someone who bought the most expensive gun in *Hunt*. Balanced? No. But its peaks and valleys are way more pleasing than every shooter that's had its edges shaved off.

Jacob: *Hunt: Showdown* is the game you haven't been playing but absolutely should be.

Morgan: Top 10? It's about time.

5 HITMAN 3

RELEASED 2021 | **LAST POSITION** 2 ▼

Phil: On its own, *Hitman 3* is a quality stealth game that would no doubt ride high on this list. But it's the full package that puts it over the top. Combined with the two Access Passes, you can play Io's full 'World of Assassination' trilogy in one game – an absurd wealth of intricate puzzle sandboxes, each hugely replayable thanks to their challenges and remixes.

Hitman's stock in trade is social stealth – the ability to blend in and gain access to places you shouldn't be. This latest trilogy features some of the best levels in the series' long history. From a murder mystery in an English manor, to an unforgettable seaside holiday, *Hitman* is packed with scenarios that will keep you entertained for hundreds of hours.

TOP 100 2022

4 APEX LEGENDS

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Nat: What do I even say about *Apex* at this point? Respawn's battle royale has taken over my life, to the point where I'm literally writing this while wearing Horizon's jumpkit. It's the best shooter you can play on PC, period. The gunplay is sublime, the movement dense with intricacies, the maps vibrant and dynamic. Beyond BR, experimental modes like Arenas and Control continue to redefine what *Apex* can even look like.

But more than any other hero shooter, *Apex* cares so damn much about its characters. The Legends are flawed, deeply human people with messy, dynamic relationships. Respawn is constantly experimenting and improving on how it can tell a sci-fi drama through battle royale, elevating *Apex* from 'good' to 'all-time great'.

3 CRUSADER KINGS 3

RELEASED 2020 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Robin: Another year of DLC and updates has only cemented this game's place as the definitive medieval grand strategy game. Or is it a role-playing game? Or a life sim? Whatever you call it, the magic of stepping into the shoes of a historical ruler and attempting to steer their chaotic life like a baboon with a three-wheeled shopping cart is stronger than ever.

Fraser: I can't envision a time where I'm not obsessed with *CK*. Especially now that I can decorate my throne room and order artisans to craft me mystical weapons. It's absurdly rich in story, intrigue and delight, all bolstered by wonderful writing. If this ever drops out of the top five I'll kick off.

2

ELDEN RING

RELEASED 2022 | **LAST POSITION** New entry

Nat: *Elden Ring* is not my favourite FromSoft (what's up, *Bloodborne*?) but it is the most FromSoft game, a Soulsborne of such dizzying, terrifying scope that rolling credits on it feels akin to finishing the entire extended cut of The Lord of the Rings trilogy. A true epic, one in which the memories of first setting off from the pastoral fields of Limgrave feel like a lifetime ago.

There is so much stuff in *Elden Ring* that it's dizzying, but almost all of it – even major bosses – is optional. On my first run, I systematically eliminated every lord, shardbearer, evergaol and catacomb boss from the game in a slow, 160-hour ordeal. On my second, I sprinted straight to the midpoint of the game in 90 minutes.

Sarah: There's nothing that beats the feeling of killing a boss for the first time, especially if you've been struggling with it for days – I'm looking at you, Malenia. Even after I finished the game, I spent an obscene number of hours exploring every corner, hoping to find something lore-related that others had missed.

Dave: *Elden Ring*'s been the first FromSoft game I could stand, or even actually play (I'm not very good at games) and its mix of exploration and reward really struck a chord. But deep down I know there will come a time when I can no longer cope with some attritional boss I cannot beat and will quit the game for good. For now it still lives on my SSD as wonderful gaming potential, though I'm actually now a bit scared to dive back in lest I arrive at that expected hard stop and it negates all the fun I've had in the game. I have issues.

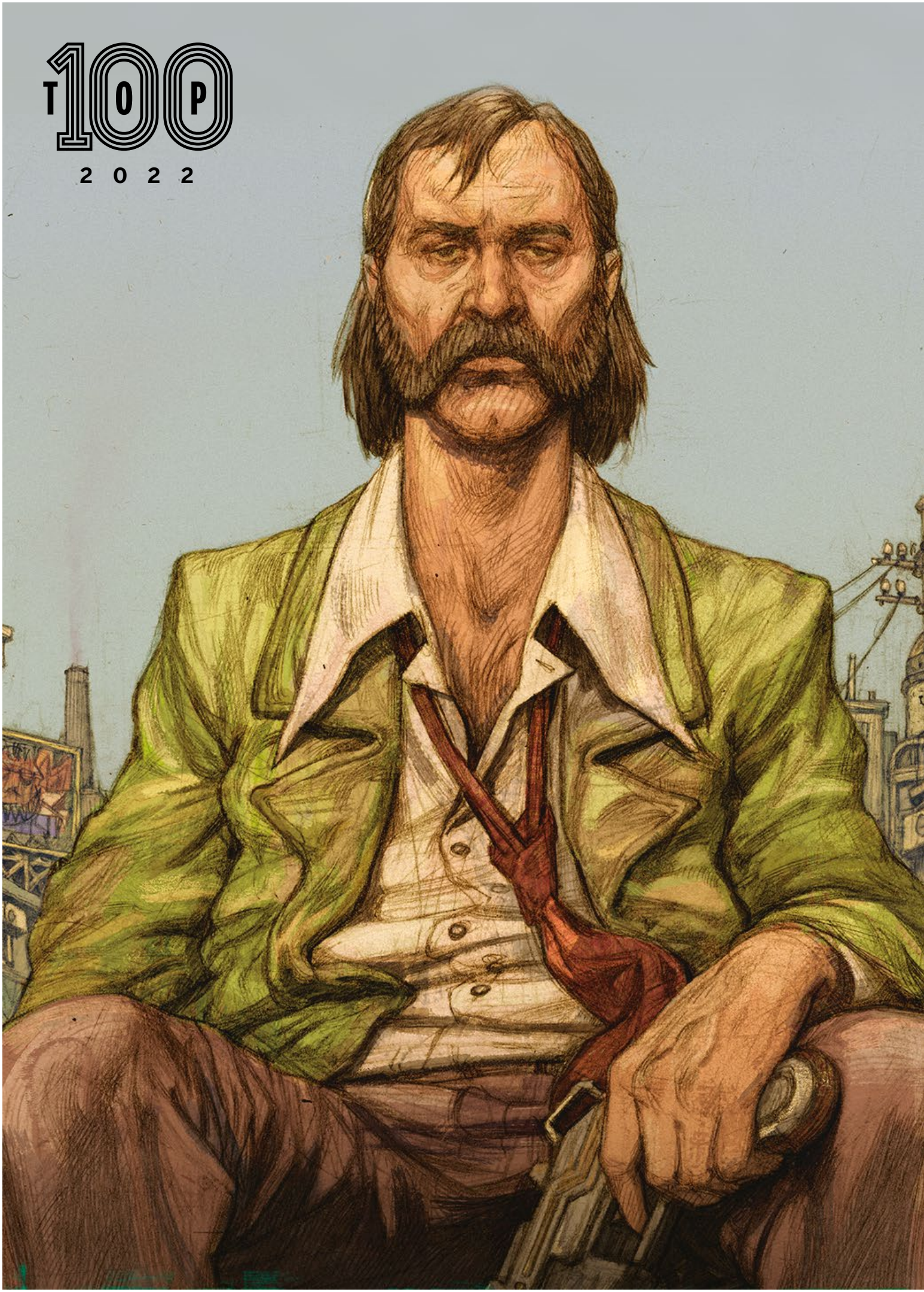
Ted: Playing *Elden Ring* had me feeling like the food critic in Ratatouille, only instead of a bucolic French cottage it sent me back to playing *Dark Souls* on a dorm room floor in 2014. It has just the right level of challenge, a dizzying array of character build options in a fantastic combat system, and the best setting FromSoft has created to date.

Robin: Like Dave, I never quite clicked with From games before. I liked *Dark Souls* and *Bloodborne* well enough, but they didn't really stay with me. *Elden Ring*, though, burrowed right into my mind the minute I stepped out into its open world. I don't think it's the easiest From game, but it's certainly the most accessible, combining clearer storytelling with a setting that lets you choose your own challenge and pace. It's a more familiar fantasy world than *Dark Souls*', and yet is still shot through with From's distinctive identity, at every turn contrasting wonder, sadness and horror.

And who knew that From's organic approach to environmental design would be such a perfect fit for an open world? It can't be overstated how refreshing it is to explore a landscape and just find cool stuff around every corner without a map marker or a quest log in sight. The sense of true discovery is magical, and the land's stories are told not through journals and exposition, but just in the physical scenes you creep your way carefully through.

TOP 100

2022



1

DISCO ELYSIUM - THE FINAL CUT

RELEASED 2019 | **LAST POSITION** No change

Robin: There's no game out there that has a stronger sense of its own voice than this one. Three years on from its original launch, I still regularly see people talking about its characters, riffing on its unique dialogue, and making memes about communism. That's a testament to how much its personality shines through.

Its approach to stats and character building remains brilliantly unique – turning each of your abilities into its own voice in your head, and not so much giving you moral choices as moral traps in its quest to nail down your political standings. It's refreshing to see a game push so hard for innovation in an isometric CRPG.

Katie: How sad that I only discovered the morbid joy of this game in 2022. And yet, how perfect that it coincides with my current obsession with true crime. It's sharp, intense, and sumptuously dark, yet it somehow manages to make me titter under my breath at every encounter.

I especially adore making fun of racist asshats, wittering on about sebum seeping into the brains of the lesser races and making them stupid. Just wow. I look forward to putting all my points into a practical way to destroy him.

Jacob: If there's a game that truly deserves a rerelease every year for the next decade, it's *Disco Elysium*. There are few games that feel as timeless and sure of their storytelling. I've played it through twice and I still feel it has much more to tell me – I just can't bring myself to lean into the authoritarian cop lifestyle, no matter how entertaining that side of the game appears to be.

Fraser: I knew I'd love *Disco Elysium* when I died trying to get clothes from a ceiling fan in the first minute, which was further cemented when I had a heart attack after kicking a mailbox. It's hysterically funny and absurd, but simultaneously blessed with lots of smarts and the ability to make me weepy and introspective. I thought *Elden Ring* might knock it off the top spot, but here it is again, for the third time, and really this is the only place for it.

Wes: Wait a second, *Elden Ring* isn't no. one? This list is a sham! ... is what I would say if any game besides *Disco Elysium* beat FromSoftware's magnum opus. *Elden Ring*'s scope was incredible, but it was very much *Bigger Dark Souls* in most ways, and we've played a hell of a lot of *Dark Souls* over the last decade. Meanwhile, no one else has made a game like *Disco Elysium*: an RPG that eschews combat, is a little bit Nietzsche and a little bit Mr. Bean, and still manages to deliver a gripping mystery despite being weird as hell.

You can play *Disco Elysium* on consoles now, but this is unabashedly a PC game, and a worthy evolution of the '90s RPGs that were the best the PC had to offer.

Jody: Some games rely on lengthy cutscenes to tell their stories. If you've ever watched a Quantic Dream cutscene and thought David Cage should have sent you an email instead, the way *Disco Elysium* deploys paragraphs of beautiful words comes as blessed relief.

Its descriptions of crime scenes bulge with evocative phrasing, while your skills talk to you in styles of their own, Shivers describing the city and its inhabitants distantly while Electrochemistry shares its expertise on drugs and drinks with a pusher's eagerness, begging you to try them all. Visual Calculus examines clues so adroitly it's like being inside Sherlock Holmes.

> **"IT'S HYSTERICALLY FUNNY AND ABSURD, BUT BLESSED WITH LOTS OF SMARTS"**

Then there are the characters, whose voices are distinct whether you're discussing obscure philosophy, talking political history, or being shouted at.

I've played a few games 'inspired by' *Disco Elysium* this year, but none of them measured up. If you want another RPG that does philosophical arguments about reality this well, you still have to go back 23 years to *Planescape: Torment*. I don't see *Disco* being dethroned for a while.

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